

## Social Interaction and Social Relations: A Sociological Analysis

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**ABSTRACT** This paper reviews critically the relevance of social interaction and social relations as the core foundation for all human endeavours, making it possible for people to live together in every existing society. This is with a view to give a clear understanding and to demonstrate its centrality in the existence of human societies and in the emergence of the discipline of sociology. The objective of this paper is to create an understanding of social interaction and social relations. The paper employed the symbolic interactionist perspective to review the components and types of social interaction, socialisation and how it has evolved over the years. The study reveals that social interaction and social relations are very important, and form an integral part of human societies and this is why stigmatisation and ostracism are very effective as tools of social control and regulation. The study also reveals that social interaction and social relations form both micro and macro sociological orientations and have evolved over time, and this evolution has been facilitated by advancement in technology and globalisation. The paper concludes that the development of human beings and their societies depends on social interactions and social relations. The study recommends that the turn that social interaction and social relations takes can determine the level of development because if, social interaction is chaotic, it will bring about confusion and conflict and there will be little or no development. But, if social interaction were that of cooperation, more development would be recorded by society.

### INTRODUCTION

When the researchers sat down and pondered over this topic, they were amazed at how the interactions within human beings affect and influence their lives. They realised that social interaction is at the root of all their accomplishments as fulfilled human beings, their problems and disappointments and their health, all of which tend to bear on their being and determine whether they would be happy human beings or disgruntled ones. The discussion of social interaction is mainly a discussion at the micro-level of sociological analysis, a discussion of daily life (Giddens 2008). This is because most of the things that human beings do are in contact with others or in anticipation of the reaction of others. According to Giddens (2008), the importance of social interaction lies in the fact that peoples' lives are organised around the repetition of similar patterns of behaviour from day to day and it reveals how humans can shape reality by acting creatively and it is a window into larger social systems and institutions. This importance was also stressed by Curry Jiobu and Schwirian (1998) that maintained that social interaction is of crucial importance to understanding social life because humans spend much of their time talking, listening and carrying out activities with

other people. The different groupings found in every society are products of the interactions that they have with others (Mucha 2006; August and Rook 2013; Kitishat and Freihat 2015).

It is important to point out that social interaction can be in the form of verbal or non-verbal communication (Kitishat and Freihat 2015). What is said with words in most cases is expanded with facial expression, gestures and other forms of body language. Social interaction is based on shared understanding because for people to understand the behaviour of others, they must share some level of understanding. For instance, humans routinely use non-verbal cues in their behaviour to make sense of the behaviour of others. Importantly, interaction can be between strangers or intimate/familiar persons and when interaction is deepened or institutionalised, it becomes social relations. According to Znaniecki (1954), social relation is a system of functionally interdependent actions performed by two cooperating individuals who evaluate each other positively and assume definite duties towards each other. It is the social interaction that forms the basis for social relations.

There are several types of social interactions ranging from competition to conflict, coercion, exchange and cooperation. There are also components of social interaction such as status and roles, which

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shape the interactions between people and between groups. Sociologists have employed several theories to explain social interaction and social relation. This ranges from action theory, to ethnomethodology, to dramaturgy and to symbolic interactionism generally. In this paper therefore, the symbolic interactionist theory was used to discuss the phenomenon of social interaction and social relation. The main assumption of this theory is that people's behaviour is based on the subjective meanings attached to their actions. Thus, society is constructed through human interpretation. People interpret one another's behaviour and it is these interpretations that form the social bond (Crossman 2011; Hossain and Ali 2014).

The researchers therefore argue in this paper that social interaction and social relation are a result of the fact that people cannot do without each other and it is the reason behind people living in societies, in other words, it creates and makes society possible, and indeed, that is what makes human beings, therefore it is at the core of their being.

This paper becomes important in the light of the fact that a clear understanding of social interaction and social relations is needed in order to demonstrate its centrality in sociology. As social interaction is at the root of all human endeavours, relationships, health, happiness, achievements and fulfilments throughout the life course and even human society, it becomes necessary that students and other stakeholders be exposed to facets, issues, types, and components that make up and influence social interaction. This would help in creating a better understanding of other people's behaviour during social interaction and social relations. Furthermore, a clear understanding of the sociological analysis of social interaction and social relations would give insight to students and teachers of sociology and would enable them to key into their great search for the sociological imagination (Maynard and Peräkylä 2006; Umberson and Montez 2010).

### **Objective**

The objective of this paper therefore is to create a clear understanding of social interaction and social relation. The paper would unfold as follows, that is, starting with the introduction, which would be followed by the clarification of concept, theoretical framework, socialisation, types and components of social interaction, sociologists

and social interaction and the evolution of social interaction from a time perspective, a brief discussion and conclusion.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted the content analysis methodology in the review of related literatures on social interaction and social relations in the context of human behaviour and interpretation.

### **OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION**

From the foregoing, a clear understanding of social interaction and social relations has shown that the components of social interaction are status and roles. The role played by each person in interaction is important because it is this role that is attached to their status that determines how they can be interacted with. For instance, the way one relates with a king is different from the interaction with an ordinary person meaning that there are rules necessary for smooth social interaction. This role identification can sometimes be premised on elements such as interest, gratification and orientation of the individual aiding community living and social bonds (Benamar et al. 2017).

In discussing social interaction, sociologists employed both macro and micro perspectives and all these point to the fact that social interaction is always encountered both at the face-to-face level and group and community and international levels. In the face-to-face interactions, it was shown that social interactions use roles and status to play as if on stage, corroborating Goffman (1959b), who saw social encounters and interaction in theatrical terms. Similarly, Jaegher and Froese (2009) argued that the individual relations in any social settings depends on the social agents they depend on and on the long-run shape the individual due to the role played and internalised through social interaction processes (Jaegher and Froese 2009).

Furthermore, time and space were also seen by sociologists as important in human interaction. When people flout the norm of invading another person's space, social interaction and relations become disorderly and it would also affect the orderliness in the society. In the same vein, Herschbach (2012), pointed out that the role of sense-making in relation to individual's environment as a major component in the meanings and values placed

on given societal norms rather than individual cognitive processes. In essence, the role of social interaction on the individual social cognition speaks to the duality of 'structure and action' and how it affect the individual and also the society in return, for instance deviance (Herschbach 2012).

It was also indicated that social interaction has evolved with the times. This is an indication that social interaction is behind the development of every society. The kind of interaction is a mirror of the kind of society. For instance, the way people interact during a war is different from the way people interact during peacetime, social dialogue and driver of change. The same thing applies to ancient and modern societies corroborating Durkheim in his theory of 'Division of Labour in Society' (Durkheim 1964; Nevile and Rendle-Short 2009; Pickering and Garrod 2021; Carmona-Medeiro and Cardeñoso-Domingo 2021).

### Conceptual Clarification

#### *Social Interaction*

From the time one wakes up in the morning to the time one retires to bed at night, one is involved in social interactions and social relations with other human beings. As soon as one wakes up in the morning, one greets people around and begins to get ready for the day's business and all through the day, one is in interaction. According to Curry et al. (1998), social interaction refers to the act people perform towards one another and the responses they give in return. Social interaction involves communication and may consist of spoken words, subtle gestures, visual images or even electronically transmitted digits. Indeed virtually all human behaviours are involved (Curry et al. 1998). Social interaction is the process by which people act and react in relation to others. The social interaction process comprises ways in which partners agree on their goals, negotiate behaviour and distribute resources. In communal societies, social interaction revolves around personal relationships and people interact with the same people for their entire lifetimes while interaction in associational societies is much more diverse involving many different groups and organisations. Social interaction starts with the basic various physical movements of the body, then to actions, which have meanings and then to social

actions, which directly or indirectly are targeted at other people and which anticipates a response from other people. It is from this that social contact occurs, which is the beginning of social interaction. It is only when social interaction has taken place that social relations can be established (Znaniecki 1954; Chevalier 2011)

#### *Social Relation*

Social relation is the social link that an individual or group has with others. It could be in the form of a friendship, membership of the association, family, church and other groups (Curry et al. 1998). It connotes a deeper and established form of interaction in which the people in interaction are likely to know themselves. Indeed, constant interaction leads to established relationships. It also implies that there is a specific reason for interaction. Such interactions are found among friends, family, acquaintances and people that one knows or has known for a long time. It is important to note that there can be social relations at all levels including between countries, individuals and groups.

#### **Types of Social Interaction**

In the analysis of human behaviour, Sociologists often attempt to divide social interaction into several categories. According to Curry et al. (1998), because of the fact that social interaction includes so many behaviours, sociologists have organised it into five broad types as follows:

1. **Conflict:** Conflict is a form of interaction wherein the people are trying to overpower each other in such a way that their own interest would be the dominant interest. War situation is the highest form/level of conflict but it is important to say here that conflict is found in virtually all social situations. This ranges from family, politics, religion, industry and any setting with more than one person. This is because conflict is usually a result of disagreement in personal interests, which the actors bring to bear on the social relationships. This is because people involved in the interaction are not always having common interests. It is also important to point out that conflict is not always bad because conflict usually brings about the change and dynamics,

which society needs for development (Dahrendorf 1959).

2. **Cooperation:** Cooperation is an interaction situation in which people pull their efforts and work together in order to achieve a collective goal. In this form of interaction, an individual's interest is given up for the group interest. This form of interaction is the type described in Durkheim's mechanical solidarity (Durkheim 1947).
3. **Coercion:** Coercion is the process of forcing someone or people to do things against their will. Coercion involves the use of force to compel people to do what they ordinarily would not want to do. The state army, police and other law enforcement agencies are tools of coercion. Apart from the state, parents and significant others also use coercion to make people do their bidding against their will (Durkheim 1947; Simmel 1959a; Dahrendorf 1959).
4. **Exchange:** It is the reciprocal relationship between people. It could be in the form of the exchange of goods for goods or goods and money. It could also be in the form of the exchange of gifts or visits. Whatever form exchange takes, it should be noted that it is at the root of all human relationships because in everything one does, the expectation is that it should be reciprocated. That is the only way to maintain friendships and other relationships (Homans 1958, 1961).
5. **Competition:** In the world around, it is obvious that resources are scarce and unequally distributed. In order to obtain these resources, people engage in competition with one another. Competition therefore involves the attempt by two or more people to want to obtain the same goal. Competition is epitomised by the theory of the game (mathematic concept), which describes socio-economic phenomena exhibiting human interactions involving conflict, cooperation and competition (Neumann and Morgenstern 1944).

It is important to note that this division into categories is for the purpose of analysis because in real life situations, there is usually a mixture of these types. It is equally important to note that interaction can be focused or unfocused. According to Goffman (1973), focused interaction occurs when individuals directly attend to what others say

or do. Goffman called these encounters, and much of the day-to-day life consist of encounters with other people including family, friends, colleagues and others. Goffman also discussed the issue of front and back regions in social interaction. Front regions are social occasions in which individuals act out formal roles, a situation where people present themselves in public either as a group or as individuals. Back region are where people assemble the props and prepare themselves for more formal settings. According to Goffman (1973), this is like the back stage in a theatre performance. However, having explained the types of social relations, it is important to explain the various components of social interaction.

### Components of Social Interaction

In social interaction, the actors bring some attributes and capacities to bear on the social interactions/relationships. This brings one to the issue of status and roles. The status and roles occupied/played by people to a great extent influence their interaction with others.

#### *Status*

A status is a recognised social position occupied by an individual that is characterised by certain rights and obligations. Status to a great extent determines how people interact. There is usually the awareness and consciousness of the statuses of people in interaction in order to interact in the correct manner. It is important to point out that a person can occupy several statuses at the same time. For instance, a man can occupy statuses as a husband, father, university professor and a village chief. All the statuses occupied by a person at a given time are called a status set. Also, a master status is a status that has exceptional importance for a person's social identity (Becker 1963). It shapes the individual's entire life because it has the greatest impact on the individual. For instance, sex, race and family, among others constitute master statuses for many people around the world. According to Omi and Winant (1994), in every social encounter, one of the first things that people notice about one another is gender and race. These attributes colour the other attributes that people bring to bear on social interaction and social relationships and as such, they are master statuses for the people (Maynard et al. 2006).



Status can be achieved or ascribed. An achieved status is the type of social status a person receives/assumes due to the efforts and hard work of the individual (Giddens 2008). For instance, educational attainment and occupational position can raise a person's status. Ascribed status is the type obtained by virtue of birth, class or sex, age and so on, which the individual has no power to change (Umberson and Montez 2010).

### **Role**

The role is the expected behaviour associated with a status. According to Giddens (2008), roles are socially defined expectations that a person in a given status or social position follows. Role expectation is a very important aspect of social interaction because deviating from the roles expected of an individual is a sign of deviance and such behaviour is met with resistance and disapproval. For instance, in Nigeria, a father is expected to provide for his family and any father who fails to do so may encounter disrespect and scorn from his wife and children. The same thing applies to other roles and statuses. It is important to note here that there are several roles associated with a single status and this is called a role set. This role set brings with it the issue of role strain and role conflict. **Role Strain** is the incompatibility among roles associated with a single status. As societies undergo the transformation from traditional to industrial, roles increase in number and complexity (Curry et al. 1998). For instance, a professor may experience role strain in carrying out his duty as a teacher, researcher and community developer. In furtherance of this, **Role Conflict** can occur as a result of friction among roles associated with two or more statuses. For instance, a woman may experience role conflict in the performance of her roles as a mother, wife and university professor or bank manager. The attempt to perform all these roles at the same time produces anxiety, which is referred to as **Role Stress**. The ability to manage these successfully makes the individual a successful person in the society because this success represents a successful social interaction (Callero 1994; Datta et al. 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretically, this paper is anchored in symbolic interactionism, which is a theoretical position

advanced by Max Weber (1978), Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), Goffman (1959a) and Blumer (1969) who coined the name symbolic interactionism. There are several versions of symbolic interactionist thought but all agreed that human action is based on the meanings as interpreted by the actors. Symbolic interactionism concentrates on the micro level of social life and society is the end result of this interaction thereby making it possible to understand how social order is created and maintained. Symbolic interactionism explains how people are able to understand one another, how they interpret what is going on around them and then, choose to behave in particular ways. It therefore emphasises the meanings that people give to actions and to things. According to Mead (1934), human behaviour is different from that of other animals because it uses symbols and attaches meanings to them. When people interact with one another, they use symbols especially in the form of language, and hence the name symbolic interactionism. The self, which is a key concept in the symbolic interactionist perspective, is the way to see oneself as individuals and this self is only meaningful in relation to other selves. An individual's actions therefore are social in the sense that people are always conscious of the presence and reactions of others and this tends to shape the individual action.

According to Weber (1960), action is social in so far as by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual, it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course. Thus, one's interaction with another always involves being conscious of the reactions of others to the behaviour and the impressions one tends to create while interacting with others. In line with Weber's social action, symbolic interactionism conceives of individuals as existentially free agents who accept, reject, modify and define the community norms, roles and beliefs according to their personal interests and plans of the moment (Ritzer 1996).

This theoretical orientation believes that human beings are capable of making decisions and choices thereby differentiating itself from the functionalist perspective that sees individual action as a product of the cultural milieu in which the individual operates. This communication is made possible by the use of symbols of which language is the most prominent. According to Mead (1934), the development of language made it possible for

the distinctive development of human life. It is responsible for the origin and growth of present human society and knowledge with all the control over nature and over human environment. Also, to Mead (1959), humans possess mental capability that allows people to use language between stimulus and response in order to decide how to respond. Human language consists of gestures whose meaning is held by both the one who makes the gesture and the other to whom it is addressed. In the same vein, Blumer (1969) posited that the meaning of symbols is not universal and objective rather meanings are individualistic and subjective in that they are attached to the symbols by the receiver according to how they choose to interpret them. In social relations and interaction, people can only make sense of what is said in conversation if they know/share the social context which does not appear in the words themselves (Garfinkel 1967). Mead (1959) maintained that what is crucial to the reflective intelligence of human beings is their ability to inhibit action temporarily, to delay reactions to a stimulus. This is what people regard as wisdom and it is one of the things that differentiate humans from animals.

Mead therefore conceives the act as comprising both overt and covert aspects of human action. Within the act are attention, perception, imagination, reasoning and emotion. As such, the act encompasses the total process involved in human activity. It is these processes that create society. Looking at society and the social interaction and social relation that go on in it, one cannot agree less with Mead because the society is actually made of or is a combination of face to face relationships here and there. For instance, lecturers in departments of sociology usually slate a meeting and interact with one other alongside the heads of department in order to allocate courses, teach students and produce graduates. The same face-to-face interactions go on in all the departments in the university.

Furthermore, in interactions with one another, people tend to conform to societal norms and expectations and this is why sometimes it is not what people are in public that they really are in the privacy of their homes. Goffman (1959b) captured this in the presentation of self in everyday life, in which he maintained that there is always a discrepancy between the all too human selves and the socialised selves, and hence there is always a difference between

what people want one to do and what one wants to do spontaneously. As such, in order to maintain a stable self-image, people must perform for their social audiences, which Goffman (1959b) called dramaturgy (a view of social life as a series of dramatic performances akin to those performed on the stage). This was also captured in Shakespeare's 'As You Like It', wherein the world was described as a stage (Shakespeare (1623) collection).

These theoretical orientations have described social interactions and social relations in vivid ways. The symbolic interactionist perspective has shown that face-to-face interaction is clearly the main basis of all forms of social organisation no matter how large scaled the organisation might be. This theoretical perspective helps to give a clear meaning/understanding of social interaction and social relation in the sense that the shared meanings and symbols that make it possible for people to communicate is at the root of all human interactions, endeavours and relationships. It is also this shared meaning that makes way for the sociological imagination that inspired the founding fathers of the discipline and created the discipline of sociology. Indeed, social interaction and social relations remain the bedrock of the sociological imagination. This is in the sense that the emergence of the discipline of sociology was a child of the enlightenment and the realisation that social interaction and social relations had changed from what they used to be.

### **Socialisation: The Root of Social Interaction and Social Relations**

Socialisation is the training, which members of the society undergo in order to become accustomed to the appropriate behaviours and expectations of their particular societies. It is difficult to talk about social interaction without first talking about socialisation. This is because it is through socialisation that a child learns how to interact with other human beings.

According to Haralambus and Heald (1984), socialisation is the process by which individuals learn the culture of their society. As soon as a child is born, the child would start watching the mother and other people around by looking at their mouths when they talk, eat, smile and carry out other activities. As the child grows, they begin to copy and as they do so, they watch out

for approval and disapproval from parents and significant others. The child would drop behaviours that are met with disapproval and continue with the behaviours that are met with approval. At a certain stage of the child's development, a girl begins to make attempts to behave like the mother and a boy like the father. They do this while playing in front of the house and as they do this, they are learning how to interact socially with other human beings even for the future and this is what Haralambus and Heald (1984) called learning the basic behavioural patterns of the society. Socialisation starts from the family and as the child grows, their socialisation extends to other agents of socialisation such as school, peer group and occupational groups. Through these agencies, the individual learns the appropriate societal behaviours and interacts with fellow human beings. In fact, it is socialisation that moulds a person into a socially acceptable human being (Pescaru 2019).

When discussing socialisation, one may not fail to bring in the issue of nature/nurture debate in the moulding of the human person. This controversy was about whether human beings are biologically made or socially made. One group explains human behaviour in terms of heredity and biology while the other group insists that the individual behaviour is learned through the process of socialisation. When one looks at these two sides of a coin, one will not fail to realise that both sides have some points in the sense that certain things/traits are inherited but the bulk of the behaviour is learned over an extended time perspective. According to Haralambus and Heald (1984), a good example is the wolf children of Midnapore in which two children were found in a wolf den in Bengal in 1920. The children walked on all fours and preferred a diet of raw meat, howled like wolves and lacked any form of speech. This example is an indication that socialisation involving prolonged interaction with adults is essential not only for fitting new members into society but also to the process of actually becoming human, Haralambus and Heald 1984. The researchers totally agree with Haralambus and Heald that the socialisation process therefore is actually at the root of human behaviour and at the root of all civilisations and interactions because it is socialisation that teaches one how to interact.

### **The Importance of Social Interaction and Social Relations**

The researchers want to start this section by looking at how humans make sense of their self-identity, of who they really are, what their targets and ambitions, and dreams and aspirations are. It is only when one is able to make sense of these, that one can develop a correct impression about ourselves and with this, one can go into the world and interact properly with others. Knowing all of these would help the individual to become normal, sociable persons. The only way through which one makes sense of all of these is through their thought processes. Interestingly, one takes their thought processes and their ability to think for granted. Has one ever wondered why they are able to think with ease? It is because they have symbols already registered and embedded in the brain, which they can easily pick from and put together and make meaning/sense of the world. With this they are able to make decisions. This symbol is their language. Language enables them to gather and interpret their thoughts and the actions of others. Importantly, language is acquired through social interaction and social relations with other human beings. The point being made here therefore is that social interaction makes it possible for one to make sense of the world and be able to impact on other people and also actualise dreams, which are the ultimate goal of one's earthly existence (MacRae 2011).

A child is taught how to interact with others from infancy due to the fact that if a person cannot interact with others, it is very difficult for such a person to survive. If a person is debarred from interacting with other human beings, the person naturally feels unhappy and isolated. At this juncture, one should ponder over why people feel so bad and isolated when they cannot interact with other human beings. This leads to why ostracism as a strategy for social control is very effective in making individuals conform to societal norms and expectation. Ostracism is the act of isolating a person or group in such a way that there would be no form of contact between the person and the rest of the society (Hurst et al. 2013; Perez-Felkner 2013; Alhassan 2015).

For instance, among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, there is no history of traditional prisons because throughout the ages, ostracism has been

used by the people to punish offenders and to make people conform and be respectable members of the society. These social control mechanisms are informal and unwritten procedures but acceptable and internalised by members of the community. Such that if any member of the society is not conforming to societal norms and expectations, the society will make a rule banning the individual from participating in any of the community activities and that any person that talks to the ostracised person would pay a fine of say ₦2,000, ₦5,000 or more depending on the degree of the offence. With this, people would start running away from the person including their very close friends. Such a person cannot buy or sell things in the market. Within a very short time, such a person would go and pay the stipulated fine no matter how strong-hearted the individual is. This is because the inability to interact with others can be devastating and can kill a healthy person (Onyeozili and Ebbe 2012; Igbo and Ugwuoke 2013; Isidienu 2021).

The same thing applies to the issue of social stigma. Stigma is a moral statement of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour. Stigma is based on negative imagery, which has become associated with people. The ancient Greeks used indelible ink to brand a criminal or bad person, that is, to draw visible signs on the bodies of criminals and immoral persons. This was done in order to warn people of the fact that this person was dangerous or immoral and should be rejected and avoided. As such, stigmatisation is not totally bad because in this particular case, it was a way of managing the security system of the society. Stigmatisation is also applied to people living with certain illnesses especially infectious and incurable illnesses. In a stigmatisation situation, the stigmatised is shunned and isolated and barred from having any form of social intercourse. Importantly, stigma makes life very difficult for the stigmatised. This is why in the case of HIV/AIDS, the associated stigma render people living with HIV/AIDS vulnerable to degenerating easily from HIV to AIDS thereby dying quickly and this is why UNAIDS Director Peter Piot called stigma the third epidemic and this could explain the concerted effort to reduce HIV/AIDS stigma globally (Fagan and Meares 2000; Simon and Sparks 2013; Mégret 2013).

So far, what the researchers are trying to bring out here is to clearly demonstrate the importance of social interaction and social relations. With all these one is not far from the truth that human beings are social in nature and they seek the company of others. As such, people try as much as possible to avoid anything/act that would debar them from interacting with other thereby demonstrating the fact that social interaction and social relations are very important for the survival as human beings.

### **Sociologists and Social Interaction and Social Relations**

Sociology as a discipline hinges on social interaction as a core tenet or root. Indeed, the fundamentals of human behaviour and the sociological imagination are about social interaction. As such, sociologists, irrespective of their inclinations have discussed the issue of social interaction and social relations extensively. Some have discussed it as face-to-face relationships while some others discussed it at the level of broader social structures. Comte's (the father of sociology) sociology was a reaction against the enlightenment and French revolution (Ritzer 1996). Comte reacted negatively to these events because of the disorder the two events brought to the French society. One may ask, what was this about. It was about the fact that people no longer saw the king as a divine representative on earth, the king had been demystified to be a normal human being and this changed the social interaction and social relations in French society. This brought about the beginning of the discipline of sociology. Comte therefore propounded an evolutionary theory of society and social interaction and social relation in which the theological stage represents the period of the belief in the supernatural powers, the metaphysical stage represents the period of the belief that nature explains everything and the scientific stage represents the period of observation of the social and physical worlds to search for laws of nature. It is important to note that all these stages represent different forms/evolution of social interaction.

Spencer propounded a theory of evolution that the society had moved from complex to doubly compound to trebly compound. Also, that society has moved from militant to industrial societies. These different societies represent different forms



of social interaction and social relation. Also Spencer's theory of survival of the fittest was a theory of competition, which is also a form of social interaction (Mucha 2006; Kitishat and Freihat 2015).

Durkheim (1964) in his discussion of mechanical and organic solidarity stressed the point that in mechanical solidarity, people adhere strictly to societal norms and communal life, which means that social interaction is more personalised and deeper than in organic solidarity in which interaction is more diverse, peripheral and akin to what happens in urbanism. In mechanical solidarity, the society is small, has a simple division of labour and relies on uncomplicated technology and because everyone participates in the same social life within the same culture, they come to share the same values. Thus, people are more egalitarian in nature and they tend to live a communal life and feel very much concerned about people's personal matters. This form of social interaction is akin to what is found in villages where everyone knows everyone else and many of the residents are related by blood or marriage. Social interaction in this context is close knit and people are very careful not to violate the societal norms and values. Moreover, there is less competition and conflict in this form of social relationship. While in an organic society, people performed tasks using complex tools and they seldom interact directly with one another (Curry et al. 1998). According to Durkheim, this difference amongst people makes them interdependent on one another and holds them together. The mechanical and organic solidarity represent different forms of social interaction and social relations.

Also not left out in this discourse is the Marxian view of the society in which the bourgeoisie oppresses the proletariat and this brings conflict situations, which that can only be redressed by a revolution (Marx 1848). These sociological theorists mainly discussed social interaction from the macro-sociological point of view.

The issue of social interaction, which has more to do with face-to-face social encounter is captured more succinctly by sociologists that discussed social interaction from the micro-sociological point of view. Goffman adopted William Shakespeare's submission in 'As You Like', which posited that "All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players, they have their exits and their entrances and one man in his time plays many parts" (Curry et al. 1998). In dramaturgy, Goffman

(1959b) saw social encounters and interaction in theatrical terms. Using the theatre analogy, he talked about individual behaviour being performances put on for audiences with different roles played on different occasions (Marsh 2000). Goffman also used back and front stages to demonstrate what is found in the private lives of people and in how people present themselves to the public. Goffman was apparently a social interaction observer who possessed an extraordinary ability to appreciate the subtle importance of insignificant aspects of everyday conduct (Manning 1992). According to Goffman (1959b), individuals would try to guide the impression that others form of them. The importance of giving a convincing impression to others and the obligation to live up to that impression often forces people to act a role. A fundamental point that underlies all social interaction is that when one individual interacts with others, the person would like to discover as much about the situation.

Ethno-methodology is more concerned with how people interpret their communication with other people, how people decide whether something is real or not, and the construction of social reality. The emphasis is on the method with which people communicate with others and their interpretation of this behaviour. According to Marsh (2000), Garfinkel's (1967) detailed examination of how people go about defining and deciding on social reality in everyday situation offers a way of studying how daily life is organised. The phenomenological perspective argues that the actor sees and interprets and experiences the world in terms of meanings. Meanings are constructed and reconstructed by actors in the course of social interaction. According to Atkinson (1978), the social world is a construction of actors' perception and subjective interpretations. Ethno-methodology brings in the issue of orderly social interaction, which can only be possible if people abide by social rules. This goes to show that social interaction and social relationships have rules, which make the entire social system orderly.

In discussing social interaction, Simmel's contribution was mainly in the forms or pattern of interaction. According to Simmel (1907), the microscopic molecular processes within human material are the actual occurrences that are concatenated into those macroscopic solid units and systems. Simmel (1907) equated society with interaction. According to Ritzer (1996), Simmel

maintained that society is only the synthesis or the general term for the totality of these specific interactions, that society is identical with the sum total of these relations. Simmel's dominant concern was the forms or patterns of social interaction. Forms are the patterns exhibited by the associations of people (Levine 1981).

The real world is composed of innumerable events, actions and interactions. According to Simmel (1959b), the task of the sociologist is to impose a limited number of forms on social reality, particularly on interaction. In social geometry of social relations, Simmel (1959b) was mainly concerned with numbers and distance, and the impact of numbers on the quality of interaction. In his discussion of the dyad and triad, he pointed out that there was a crucial difference between a two-person group and a three-person group. In a dyad group, the interaction between two members constitutes just one social relationship. Dyadic relationships are often intimate, emotional and deep because each member focuses exclusively on the other. In a three persons group, there is a change in the nature of social interaction because the addition of a third person causes a radical and fundamental change. In a triad, a number of new social roles become possible and the development of social structures that can become separate from and dominant over individuals. Also, in a triad group, coalitions form and shift easily, and with every shift, the odd person can become the target of group pressures. According to Simmel (1907), increasing size and differentiation tend to loosen the bonds between individuals and leave in their place much more distant, impersonal and segmental relationships. In corroboration of Simmel (1907), increase in world populations and the current globalisation have resulted in forms of social interactions and social relations that were never imagined, as situations arise where people interact with people they have never met and would probably not meet all their lives, which is different from what is found in ancient societies.

Furthermore, the researchers cannot close this section on sociologists and social interaction without discussing social exchange as an important springboard for social interaction. Indeed, Homans (1958) regarded it as the most important. This is because human relationships and interaction are based on reciprocity. It could be in the form of exchange of money for goods or gifts or emotional need. In whatever form, it is important. For instance, if Mr. A

does a favour for Mr. B, it is a social obligation for Mr. B to reciprocate this favour. A child is therefore brought up to reciprocate favours received from people because anybody who receives a favour without reciprocating may stop getting favours from others, which has great implications for the person's happiness and achievements.

### **Gender and Social Interaction and Social Relations**

From Plato to Aristotle and to the present times, gender has always been a basic element in social interaction and social relationships. In most societies of the world, patriarchy is the main ideology that guides social interaction and social relations. Due to the patriarchal organisation of societies, women have suffered untold disadvantages and discrimination. Writing on gender discrimination in early American life, Trull (1997) described the following scenario.

In the early 1800s, Texas was frontier territory. One historian noted that settlers believed Indians were to be killed, African Americans were to be enslaved and Hispanics were to be avoided. In the 1830s, these Texans built a Baptist church at independence, which had two doors, that is, one, the front door, was for white males and the second door, the back door, was for women and other 'creatures'.

Patriarchal gender relations are such that women are subordinated and treated as inferior to men and this affects women and men in their social interaction. This issue of regarding females as inferior human beings played out in the scenario above because the white males regarded their white females as inferior humans and that was what informed equating the white females with other 'creatures' (blacks, Hispanics, Indians and other, so called 'coloured' people) that represent lesser humans. Grouping women and other creatures has serious implications for gender relations outside the church and in everyday life. According to Richardson (1988), in conversations that include both genders, men make nearly all the interruptions, set the topic of discussion and ignore women's attempt to contribute. Also, men tend to occupy a bigger space when seated with a woman and when walking along the street, the man places his arm on the woman's shoulder and pulls or pushes her along thereby directing her movement (Curry et al. 1998).

The patriarchal gender relations also affect husband and wife interactions and relationships. Apart from the man being the head of the family, most societies permit a man to marry several wives. It is only in few societies like the Nayars of southern India that a woman can be married to two men at the same time, which is regarded as abominable in many societies. This form of interaction is further carried to politics, educational and religious institutions. Women are hardly presidents, clergy, vice chancellors and heads of other institutions because they are already defined as inferior. Their status as women is a master status, which colours any other status no matter the particular woman's stature. Indeed, religion has been used as a great tool and strategy for subordination of women because whatever comes out of the religious leader's mouth is regarded as a message from God and anyone who disobeys it disobeys God and anyone who says anything against it commits blasphemy. At weddings, the religious leader would say that woman must obey their husband and submit to him. This has been misinterpreted by many men who treat their wives as slaves. This has also made it impossible for battered and aggrieved women to obtain help. The inferior status of women in social interaction and social relation has meant a high level of illiteracy, poor health, poor self-worth, low ambition, low self-actualisation and fewer achievements in life generally pointing out the fundamentality of social interaction and social relations in the very essence of human existence (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1996; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 2006; Ghosh et al. 2019; Friebel et al. 2021).

### **The Evolution of Social Interaction and Social Relations**

In this sociological analysis of social interaction and social relations, it is important to point out that social interaction and social relations are not static. It changes with the times, and the changes in the social structures, technologies, improvements in science and arts. The researchers therefore, deemed it fit to discuss the evolution of social interaction and social relations over the years, decades and centuries.

In ancient times, social relations and interaction was communal in nature and involved a lot of personalised intimate relationships. According to Curry et al. (1998), in communal societies, social

interaction revolves around personal relationships and people typically interact with the same group of people throughout their entire life times. A person that interacts with the same group of people all their life would naturally be very familiar with such people and would relate with them in a more intimate and cordial manner. In the *Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1964) conceived mechanical solidarity as characterised by a relatively undifferentiated social structure with little or no division of labour. Durkheim argued that because people are very similar in this type of society, they tend to believe very strongly in a common morality and any offence against a shared value system is likely to be severely punished. This scenario is akin to what is found in villages. As the researchers have discussed elsewhere, the villages use fine, banishment, death, ostracism and stigma to punish anyone who violates the norms and values of the society. In order to avoid the suffering and embarrassment associated with the above social control measures, everyone in such societies tend to conform to the expected behaviours, roles and responsibilities of the society. As such, it is the fact that people are similar in activities and responsibilities that made them develop a collective conscience that holds the members of a society together, Durkheim (1964).

While in organic solidarity, people occupy more specialised positions and have a much narrower range of tasks and responsibilities. In organic solidarity, people are held together by the differences among people, the fact that they have different tasks and responsibilities and therefore dependent on one another for survival and this is why much of the social interaction in such context are a means to an end. According to Wirth (1938), interactions with sales people in shops, cashiers in banks or ticket collectors on trains are passing encounters entered into not for their own sake but as means to other aims. Moreover the people in organic solidarity are highly mobile and the bonds between people in interaction are weak. Wirth further argued that contacts between city dwellers are fleeting and partial and are meant to other ends rather than being satisfying relationships in themselves.

The changes in the division of labour, therefore, signifies the changes in social interaction and social relations in that social interactions and social relations in mechanical solidarity is more emotional oriented and with greater bonds between actors than what is found in organic

solidarity, which is akin to urbanism described by Wirth (1938) that in cities large numbers of people live in close proximity to one another without knowing most of the others personally. It is pertinent to note that Durkheim's *Division of Labour in Society* is similar to what Toennies (1963) described in *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* in which he described European modernisation as passing from community to society through the process of rationalisation. This involved a move from relationships based on family and guild to those based on rationality and calculation. *Gemeinschaft* represents close, emotional, and face to face relationships, ascribed social status, attachment to place and a homogeneous community while *Gesellschaft* has come to mean urbanism, mobility, heterogeneity and all those features associated with modern societies. This has demonstrated the fact that a shift in societal arrangements reflects a shift in social interaction and social relations.

In furtherance of this argument, the development of the city also demonstrates the evolution of social interaction and social relations. The stages in the development of cities also show the changes in ways in which humans interact with one another. In the ancient cities of Nile in Egypt, Tigris and Euphrates, communication among city dwellers was erratic and lacking any form of mass media, good road network and people rarely travelled long distances except for soldiers and few merchants and the population of these cities were between 15,000 to 20,000 people (Giddens 2008). Social interaction and social relations in this context have some similarities with what is found in traditional societies.

With the growth of industrialisation, there was massive urbanisation coupled with population increase and the city changed drastically to big urban spaces with some of them having 20 million inhabitants or more. This also changed social interaction and social relations. According to Giddens (2008), the expansion and development of modern cities have had an enormous impact on habits, modes of behaviour and social interaction and social relations. Interestingly, as cities mushroomed in size, most people observed that inequalities seemed to intensify signifying that social relations and social interaction are changing to the disadvantage of the poor or marginalised groups.

The evolution of social interaction and social relations also occurred in the family. Like the other aspects of the society changes, the family also changes in terms of how the family members relate with each other. For instance, the extended family bond in Nigeria is no longer as strong as it used to be. According to Dennis (1975), impersonal bureaucratic agencies had taken over many of the family functions and the warmth and close supportive relationship, which existed when the family performed a large range of functions have largely disappeared. However, Parsons (1959), maintained that by structuring the personalities of the young and stabilising the personalities of adults, the family provides its members with the psychological training and support necessary to meet the requirements of the social system, as such, the family's role is still vital. Dennis (1975) supported this view and argued that the family provides the only opportunity to participate in a relationship where people are perceived and valued as whole persons. Outside the family, individuals must often interact with strangers in terms of a number of roles. In the same vein, Fletcher (1966) argued that not only has the family retained its functions, but those functions have increased in detail and importance. These views showed that the family still plays important functions rather what has changed is the social interaction and social relationships within the family. This ranges from the interaction between husband and wives, between siblings and between parents and children. For instance, the socialisation of children is more lenient and makes the children more outspoken and gives them more voice in the presence of their parents and others. Also, the relationship between husbands and wives has shifted towards a more partnership-oriented relationships, as many women are now working and some are even breadwinners.

It is also crucial to mention that gender relations have evolved with times. At this juncture, it is important to point out that gender relation is about power relationships that play out as women and men interact with one another. The subordination of women has not disappeared per se but there has been a shift in the social interaction and social relations between men and women. Women, especially educated women, can now look men straight in their eyes and say their minds. This is something that was not possible in the years past. This has



come to mean that many women can now assert themselves and pursue careers, earn money of their own and be in a leadership position. For instance, in the traditional Igbo society, a woman was not expected/supposed to have/own money. Everything she laboured for belonged to her husband who was supposed to use it for the family and give it to each family member as required. This influenced gender relations because women did not have any power to challenge anything or say their mind because they did not have the economic power to back their decisions up and nobody reckons with such decisions. Today, many women earn their own money and can acquire properties and have come to be respected by their husbands and significant others and this has brought some shift in gender relations (social interaction and social relations) between women and men.

The researchers cannot end this discussion on the evolution of social interaction and social relations without talking about how advancement in technology and globalisation have brought shifts in social interaction and social relations. According to Giddens (2008), globalisation refers to the fact that all humans increasingly live in one world so that individuals, groups and nations become interdependent. Globalisation is created by the coming together of the political, social, cultural and economic factors, which have been driven forward by the development of information and communication technology that have intensified the speed and scope of interaction between people all over the world. According to Held (1999), a single transoceanic cable could carry some 600,000 voice paths. Also, today, the spread of communication satellite has been significant and a network of more than 200 satellites is in place to facilitate the transfer of information around the globe and the impact of these communication systems have been staggering (Giddens 2008).

According to Wheeler (1998), there are even keyboard symbols for kisses (\*), kisses on the lips (:\*) and embarrassed giggles (LOL), and all those interactions that make courtship exciting and safe. Furthermore, in a doctor-patient relationship in many countries, the social interaction has moved from face to face interaction in some cases to situations where patients interact with their doctors over the telephone and diagnosis and treatment are done through the telephone meaning that the patient may not know what the doctor looks

like. This points to the fact that social interaction being described here has gone from face to face interaction to interaction through the waves and fibre optics, even in intimate relationships. Also, large businesses that involve billions of Naira can be transacted between people in distant lands. The mobile telephone that has recently exploded globally makes it even easier and faster for people to communicate as fast as possible and has also made interaction more personalised in such a way that one can easily interact with someone far away in the privacy of their home without involving other human beings, which has been an added convenience. Also, the electronic conferencing and meetings have made these activities less cumbersome and easy. The whole lot of these facilities have reduced the physical movement of people from one place to another in order to attend to these activities. All these have been made possible by globalisation and the advancement in communication technology that accompanied it.

Sociologists also paid attention to the importance of the issue of personal space in social interaction. During social interaction, people tend to maintain some personal space. This personal space maintenance is culture and gender specific. Some cultures maintain a longer/wider space between people in interaction than others. Time is also very important in social interaction. In fact, without time, social interaction would have been haphazard (Wade 1979; Sutcliffe et al. 2012; Antonucci et al. 2017).

In Nigeria, for instance, most people use electronic banking and Automated Teller Machines to conduct their businesses outside their station. Also, family matters are discussed with even extended family members on mobile telephones instead of gathering in one place to hold family meetings thereby making these interactions more convenient, cheaper and easy. It then means that one can stay in their home/office and discuss important family issues with extended family members without having to seek for permission to travel to attend these meetings. However, in spite of the fact that these advantages accrue as a result of this technological development, face to face interactions are still very much cherished by most people especially in personal relationships and especially in traditional societies of Africa where the community would continue to be the bedrock of social existence.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, the symbolic interactionist perspective has been used to highlight the importance of social interaction and social relations. Moreover, how the sociologists discussed social interaction and social relations were also discussed. It was further indicated that social interaction and social relations have evolved over the years. As part of the interpretative sociology, symbolic interactionism explains the meaning, importance and evolution of social interaction and how it has shaped the sociological imagination over time. In all these, it was evident that social interaction and social relations are central to sociological theorising and to the creation and maintenance of order in societies.

The paper concludes that social interaction and social relations are at the root of all historical events in individual and societal lives. The crises that one has experienced in recent times between countries and between individuals are results of disjoints in social interaction and social relations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that the development of human beings and their societies should depend on the levels of social interactions and social relations. The paper also recommends that the turn which social interaction and social relations take can determine the level of development attained by any (society) nation because if social interaction is chaotic, there would be confusion and conflict and little or no development will be recorded, but, if social interaction is that of co-operation, more development would be recorded by the society. This could explain why people and countries around the world seek peace in their societies/communities and or countries/nations.

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