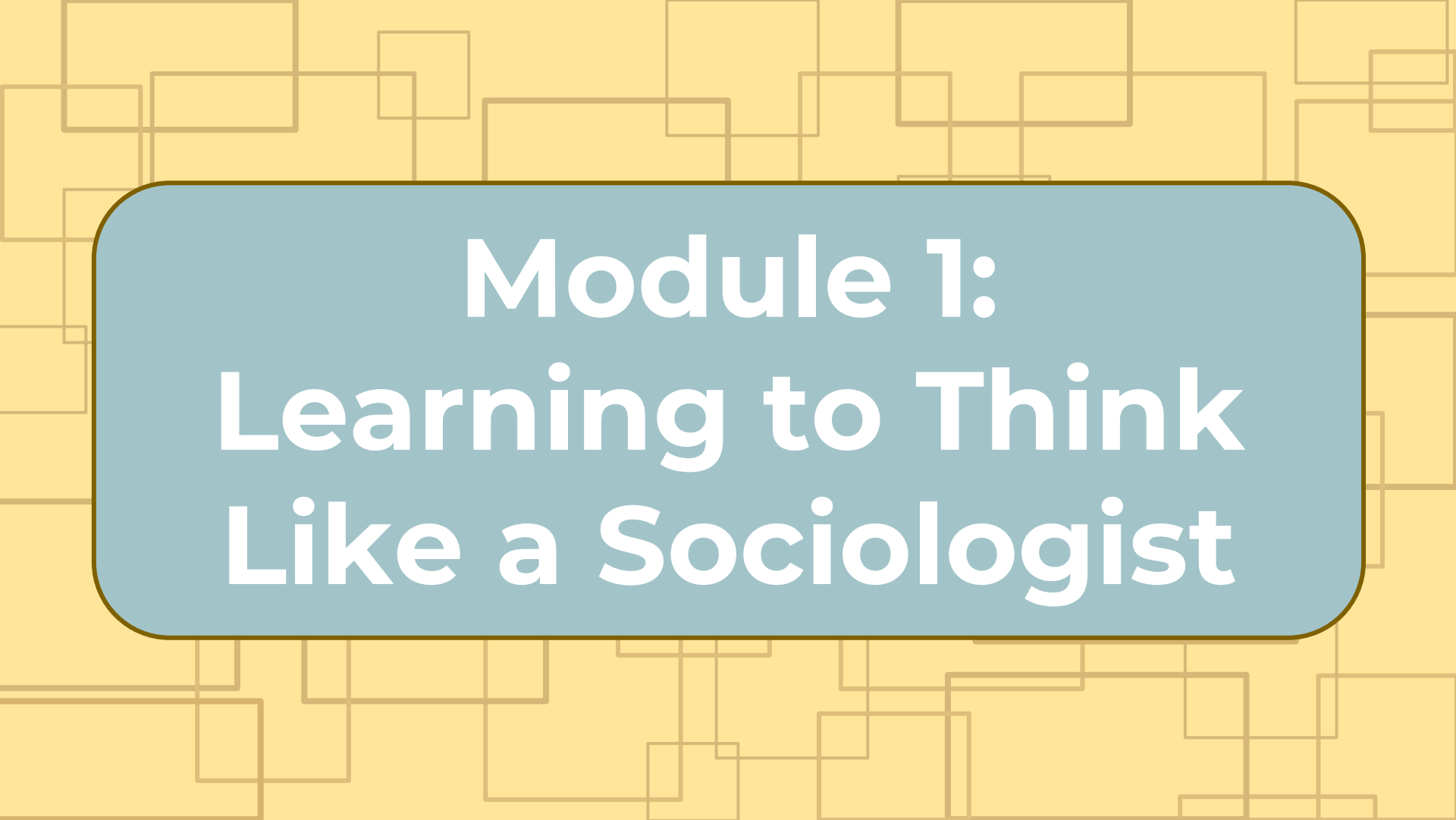


My Sociological Imagination

Liam Burton — SOC-210-OALD1



**Module 1:
Learning to Think
Like a Sociologist**

1.1

About this Presentation

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“My Sociological Imagination”

Homelessness is an issue I've been aware of since I moved to Asheville at the age of five. As I was growing up in the city and occasionally asked to venture out of the house and go exploring on my own, I was often warned of the dangers posed by the large homeless population, most of whom likely struggled with mental health issues or drug addiction. The issue stood out to me in this course because before this point, I was mostly of the mind that homelessness was the result of individual circumstances rather than structural forces, and learning that there is so much more depth and nuance to the issue—which I encounter nearly every day—was an incredibly valuable experience, one I believe will change the way I think about my city and society as a whole in the future.



A Two-Bed, One-Bath Apartment Near my Home Renting for \$1450 per Month (my image).

1.2

How Sociology Changed my Perspective

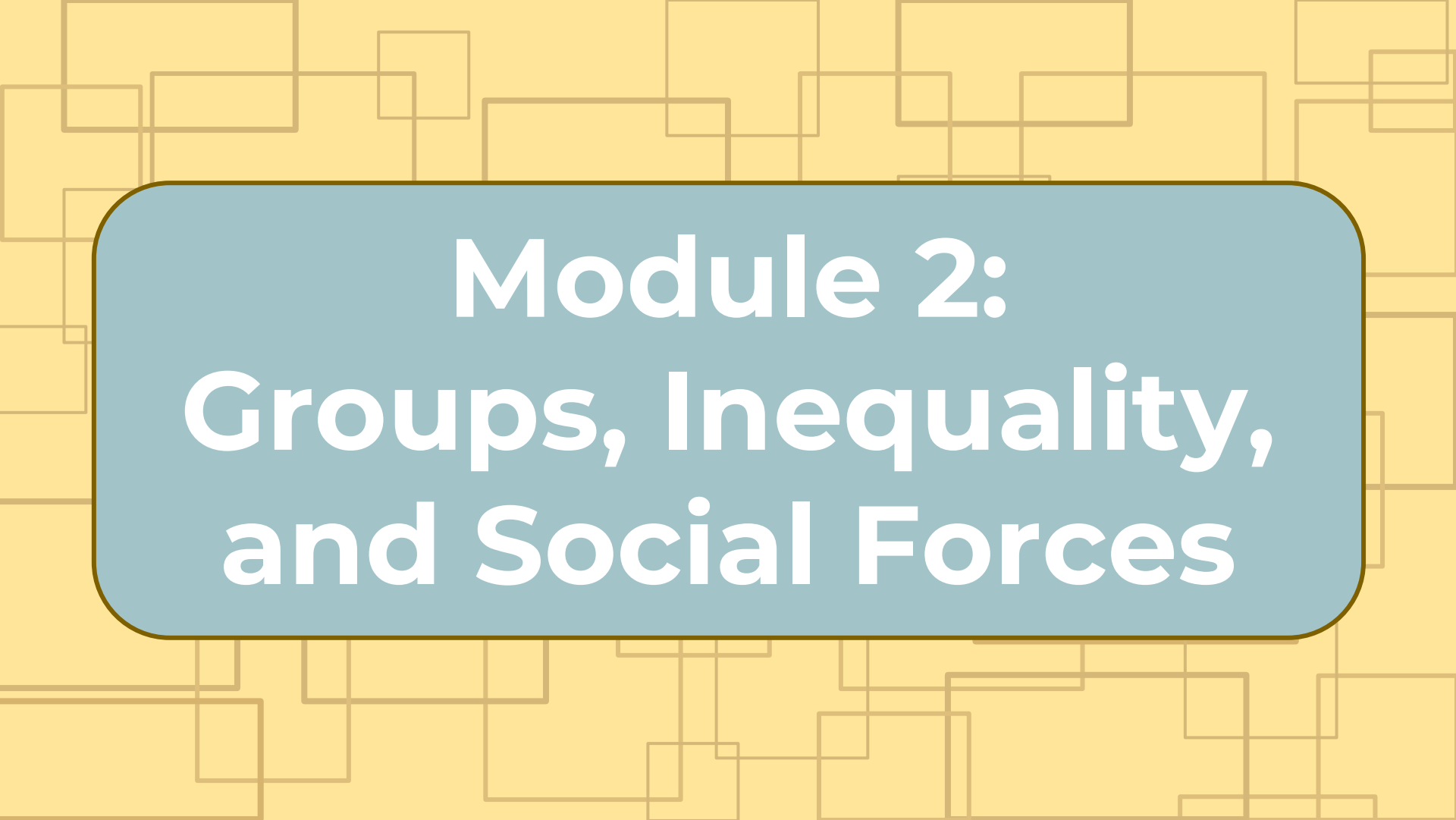
- Module one of SOC-210, on learning to think like a sociologist, left me with a new perspective on the interactions between individuals and society, and the ways in which one invariably shapes the other
- George Herbert Mead's theory of self development was particularly surprising:

“Through socialization we learn to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and look at the world through their perspective [assisting] us in becoming self-aware, as we look at ourselves from the perspective of the ‘other’” (Conerly et al., 2021b).

This theory is in direct opposition to the common idea of one's sense of self as an intrinsic quality, which exists outside or even in spite of their social context.

- This theory helped me to recognize the inextricable link between personal experience and structural forces—a relationship that may go both ways, depending on which *sociological lens* you use to analyze a given scenario.
- My sociological thinking at this point was best summarized by the following line from my Module 1 Reflection:

“the field of sociology is not homogenous, and [there] are any number of different ways to consider the same social phenomenon.”



**Module 2:
Groups, Inequality,
and Social Forces**

2.1

Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues

Sociological Imagination:

Sociological imagination, or “the ability to understand how your own past relates to that of other people, as well as to history in general and societal structures in particular” (Conerly et al., 2021d) is a perspective on the world that sociologists strive to hold. When applied to homelessness, it is the difference between blaming the issue on personal failings and recognizing structural drivers.

“Tragedian” Model:

Without considering the interdependence of individual outcomes and social structure, it is easy to blame homelessness on personal failings—quirks of that particular person’s life.

Pointing to addiction, mental illness, freak accidents, or similar events as the root causes of homelessness are examples of this thinking.

This approach fails to recognize structural forces that influence homeless individuals’ situation and makes it much easier to penalize or deride them for a variety of related reasons.

VS.

“Musical Chairs” Model:

When sociological imagination is applied, the issue of homelessness much more closely resembles a game of musical chairs: “You can say that disability or lack of physical strength caused [individuals] to end up chairless. But in this scenario, chairlessness itself is an inevitability: The only reason anyone is without a chair is because there aren’t enough of them” (Demas, 2022).

This idea argues that the only true underlying *cause* of the issue is societal structure, favoring more holistic solutions over punishment.

2.2

Inequality—Social Stratification

Social Stratification: “a socioeconomic system that divides society’s members into categories ranking from high to low, based on things like wealth, power, and prestige.” (Conerly et al., 2021f).

Under a system of social stratification, individuals are ranked by socioeconomic status, a measure which combines the three metrics mentioned above. These three tend to move with each other, so as individuals experience downward mobility caused by changes in their economic situation (as they might when someone enters a state of homelessness), so too might their status and power decrease.

Each socioeconomic class also has its own associated symbologies and class traits in the collective conscience, meaning that as individuals’ socioeconomic status changes, so do others’ perception of them.

There is no “homeless” socioeconomic class, although the condition of homelessness is a trait typically

associated with some members of the United States’ underclass—the lowest tier of the hierarchy which typically experiences the most financial hardship and accrues the least influence over their surroundings. This means that although the condition of homelessness reflects a lack of material resources and is thus purely economic, the associated decrease in status and power often become very real limiting factors in the lives of those experiencing it.

I encountered this phenomenon myself while playing the Spent simulation in discussion 6:

“The contempt with which I was treated as a low-income tenant not only enabled my landlord to continually charge extra for housing, it also robbed me of economic opportunities by reducing the amount of money I had left over to invest in my future, severely limiting my opportunities for social mobility. Thus a combination of several structural factors, including societal prejudice against the impoverished and a legal system that effectively priced me out of seeking justice, worked to diminish my ability to afford basic

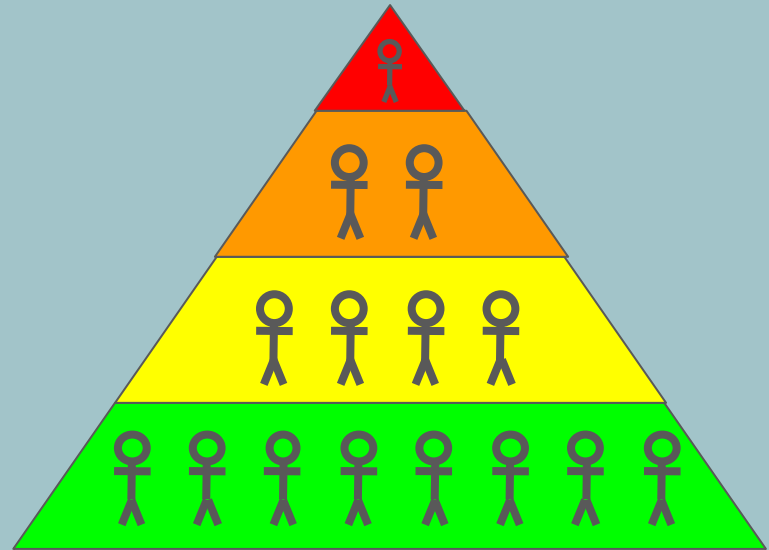
2.2

Inequality—Social Stratification (cont'd)

housing and limited my opportunities for success across every other area of life.”

In short, the relationship between individuals and society captured by the sociological imagination may vary with class:

“Members of the upper class not only have power and control over their own lives, but their social status gives them power and control over others’ lives. The middle class doesn’t generally control other strata of society, but its members do exert control over their own lives. In contrast, the lower class has little control over their work or lives” (Conerly et al., 2021c).

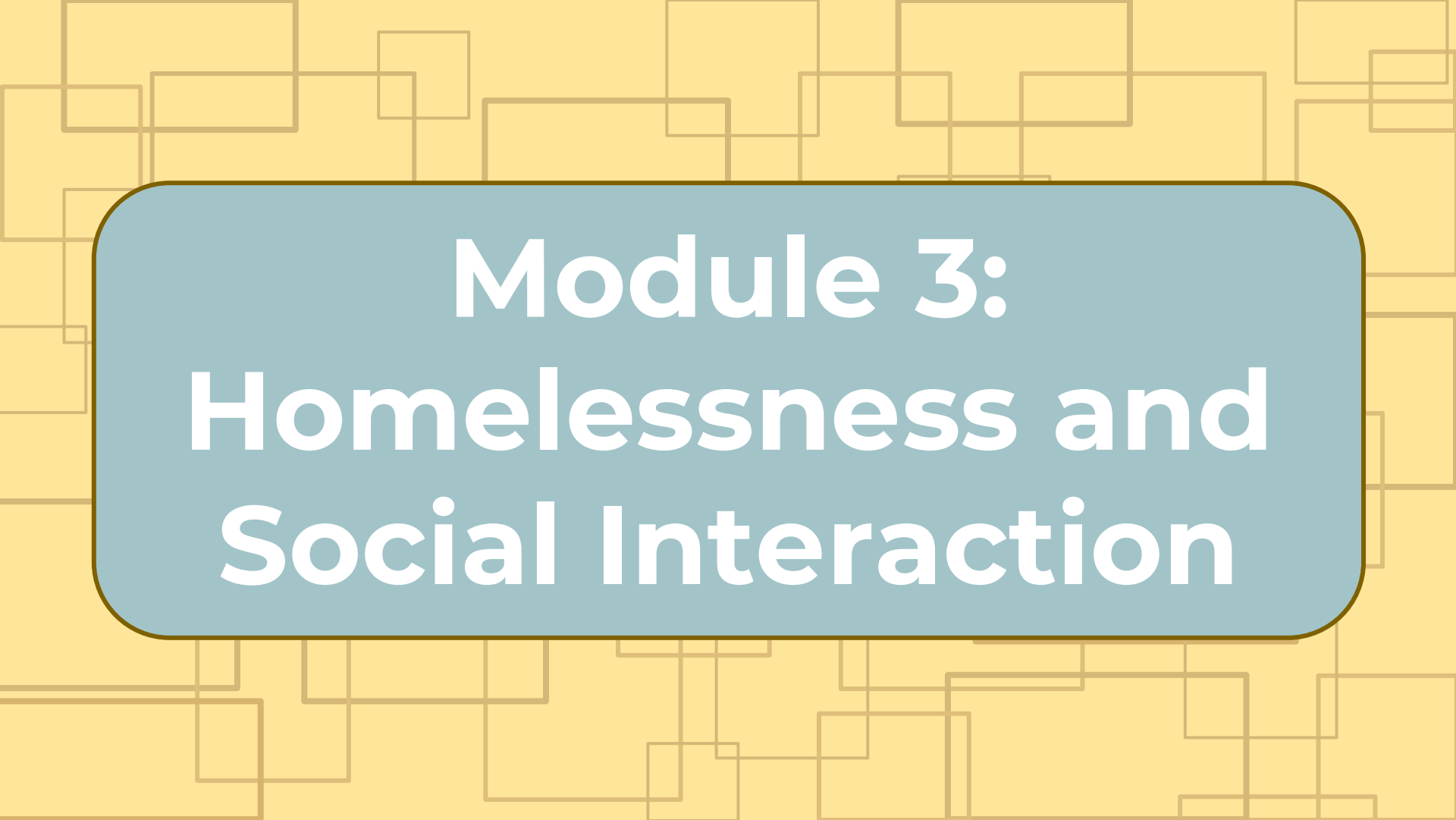


2.3

New Perspectives on Inequality

- After completing module 2, my thinking on social stratification began to shift.
- First and most importantly, I gained a lot more empathy for the life experiences of people in lower socioeconomic classes, both through an intellectual understanding of the challenges involved in possessing fewer material resources or less status than average, and through simulations.
- Secondly, I began to recognize that the interactions between wealth, status, and power that determine an individual's socioeconomic status often defy simple explanation. Although there is a tendency similar to Durkheim's meritocratic theory in the US to believe that our position in society is mostly self-determined, this is often not the case.
- Finally, I began to appreciate the different life experiences outside my own, and how drastically different they can be across class divisions. As I said in my module 2 reflection:

“The idea that there are people in the world who subsist on less than \$1.90 a day was incredibly shocking to me, and helped give me some perspective on my situation relative to the rest of the world ... the intensity of deprivation in which many people worldwide are forced to live is difficult to understand from our position as citizens of a relatively wealthy, core nation.”



Module 3: Homelessness and Social Interaction

3.1

Homelessness as a Status

Status: “the responsibilities and benefits that a person experiences according to his or her rank and role in society” (Conerly et al., 2021e).

Homelessness is an ascribed status that exists independently of the actual condition of being without permanent shelter. It describes the treatment homeless individuals receive from the rest of society as according to their perceived rank and role within it. Homelessness as a status is often communicated symbolically, usually through one’s appearance. Carrying multiple backpacks, pushing shopping carts, or wearing inappropriately warm clothing for the time of day as many homeless individuals around Asheville do, for example, may signify to others that a person is homeless and therefore requires a different set of behaviors when interacting with them.

The concepts of social status, socioeconomic class, and social power (an individual’s control over ideas and their surroundings) are all closely related. Because both wealth and social status may influence class and social power, and class and social power often determine an individual’s ability to accrue wealth and social status, it is possible for feedback loops to form.

One such example is the effect of homelessness on social

power. As an individual’s economic situation worsens (losing a home reflects an extreme lack of material resources), their socioeconomic class and social power decrease as well. Homeless individuals may then become the target of harmful stereotypes, decreasing their social status and consequently their social power (their ability to combat these stereotypes). The result is that as public perception of homelessness increasingly sours, homeless individuals are progressively less able to change it. This can lead to a chasmic rift between how homeless people view themselves and their place in society and how they are treated by it, as in the case of Laura Gutowski from Grants Pass:

“Gutowski thought she’d be without a home for a month at the most ... she still considers herself part of the Grants Pass community but said the housed residents in the area don’t ... ‘They’re trying to put us in this situation, and put us in society’s view as what they would consider homeless, or how they view homeless in their minds,’ Gutowski said” (Hayden, 2024).

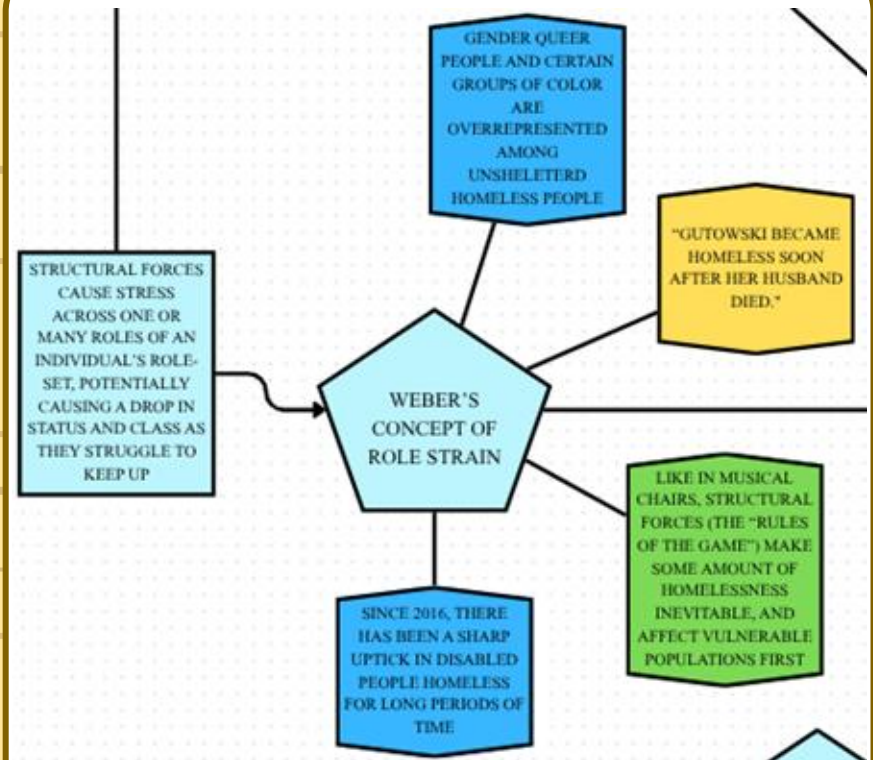
3.2

Role Strain, Role Conflict, and Role Performance

Roles: “patterns of behavior that are representative of a person’s social status” (Conerly et al., 2021e).

Role strain, or the stress one feels when too much is asked of a particular role, is one mechanism that may contribute to homelessness. As more and more is expected from every role of an individual’s roleset—parent, employee, renter, etc.—in the modern day, it becomes increasingly difficult to find the time and resources for everything. When rent spikes, for example, this puts strain on individuals’ ability to keep up with other expenses in their lives, and may even bring certain responsibilities into conflict—potentially forcing them to choose between a month of housing and next week’s groceries. In the “musical chairs” analogy, if houses are chairs, the rules of the game that divide players’ attention and make grabbing one a challenge (such as the need to walk in a circle, the potentially distracting music, and the randomized timer) can be likened to role strain.

As players struggle or fail to keep up with all of the roles of their roleset, both their financial situation and social status may suffer.



3.3

The Looking-Glass Self

The Looking-Glass Self, coined by sociologist Charles Cooley, theorizes that individuals' sense of self stems from their perception of how they are viewed by others (Conerly et al., 2021b). Following this reasoning, it is easy to see how being constantly viewed as less-than or punished for circumstances outside of one's control can be very damaging to one's identity.

For some on the other side of things, however, this is the intended effect:

“Asked if he believes the enforcement of city ordinances constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, Bouteller said he doesn't believe it is. As an example, he said when he received a \$300 speeding ticket as a teenager, it made him think about the way he drove and changed his behavior accordingly” (Hayden, 2024).

“The point is to make it uncomfortable enough for them in our city so they will want to move on down the road” (Hayden, 2024).

Anti-homeless messaging may become so literally engrained in a city that it is incorporated into the buildings. On hostile architecture (architecture designed to make public spaces inhospitable so as to police them without any actual police presence), I wrote in my HD1 post:

“This sense of unease that many people feel around homeless people is what leads cities like Asheville and NYC to design their public infrastructure to punish and drive out those with nowhere else to go in the name of a safer community”

W.I. Thomas's Thomas Theorem would imply that this kind of treatment may produce objectively measurable effects on homeless individuals' behaviors by altering their subjective constructions of reality. A homeless person continually treated as a vagrant living outside society may come to view themselves this way, and act accordingly. For example, in Asheville, homeless people and the encampments they sometimes construct are increasingly isolated from the rest of the city as housed residents regard them with mounting distrust and make the decision to disengage. Encampments may move to seldom-traveled or out-of-sight areas of the city, and I have known a few homeless individuals to be reserved or similarly mistrustful in interacting with others.

3.4

Three Approaches and Comparison

Grants Pass

- Homeless people are shunned by the community
- Temporary shelter and services exist, but are often high-barrier
- Multiple policies have been enacted that effectively criminalize unsheltered homelessness, with the goal of driving these individuals out

Norway

- Intensive data collection to raise awareness on the issue
- National policy aimed at protecting existing affordable housing, building more, and making sure it is available to those in need
- National policies inform local actions (cities & nonprofits)

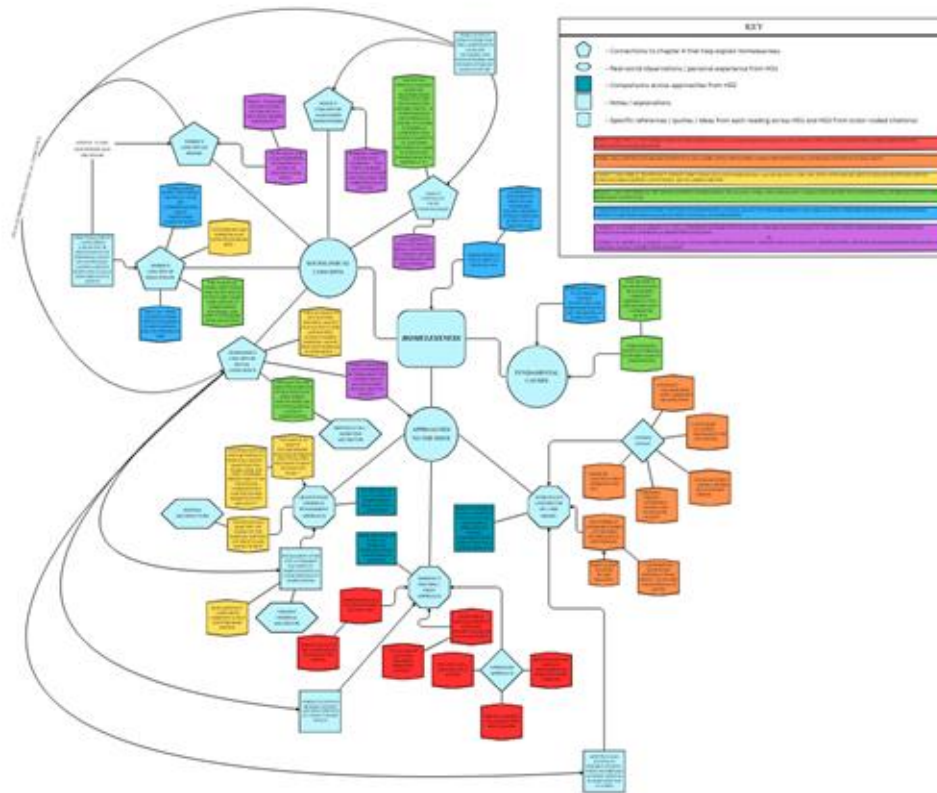
Asheville

- City policy does not reflect a broader national agenda
- Housing-first approach, but programs that connect homeless individuals are not included
- Enabling development falls to the city while ground-level assistance is left to charities

	Grants Pass	Norway	Asheville
Local policies align with a national agenda	X	✓	X
Focuses on housing	X	✓	✓
Focuses on services	X	✓	X
Focuses on criminalization	✓	X	X
Effectively addresses root causes of homelessness	X	✓	½

3.5

Concept Map



3.6

Structural Causes and Solutions

Employment/Healthcare

- There is little association between homelessness rates and either unemployment or mental health and drug-related afflictions, suggesting that increasing job and healthcare availability will not address the root causes of the homelessness crisis
- “The same pattern holds for unemployment rates: ‘Homelessness is abundant,’ the authors write, “only in areas with robust labor markets and low rates of unemployment—booming coastal cities” (Demsas, 2022).
- “The claim that drug abuse and mental illness are the fundamental causes of homelessness falls apart upon investigation” (Demsas, 2022).

Policy

- May contribute to homelessness by making it more difficult to build housing
- “housing markets have been broken by a policy agenda that seeks to reap the gains of a thriving regional economy while failing to build the infrastructure—housing—necessary to support the people who make that economy go” (Demsas, 2022).
- May be reversed (as in Norway’s case) to help combat homelessness
- To address the root causes, constructive, housing-focused policy is preferable to criminalization and the provision of temporary services.

Housing

- Low availability of housing is *the cause* of homelessness
- Supporting house-building initiatives with policy is incredibly effective
- “The Scandinavian nation has significantly reduced the number of homeless people in recent decades thanks to both sustained political backing and long-term, housing-led initiatives that have been implemented by the government at a national scale” (Yeung, 2025).
- Most direct addressal of root causes: more affordable housing means less people without a home

3.7

Local Evidence - BeLoved Asheville

BeLoved Asheville is a community organization with a stated vision “To cultivate a caring community where every individual, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, experiences the essence of belonging, wellness, fairness, and potential” (BeLoved Asheville, 2025).

They aim to improve the lives of community members through four main areas of focus:

- **Home** - BeLoved has recruited 2,792 individuals to help build deeply affordable housing in Asheville
- **Health** - BeLoved works to improve food and healthcare access and address the causes of inequity in health
- **Equity** - BeLoved aims to combat systemic racism and similar forms of discrimination
- **Opportunity** - BeLoved has shared roughly 7 million resources related to bridging opportunity gaps caused by poverty and other systemic inequalities with community members

(BeLoved Asheville, 2025).

Besides building deeply affordable housing, BeLoved serves Asheville’s homeless population in a number of ways, including by connecting individuals living on the streets with temporary shelter, healthcare, employment, and permanent housing through their Street Outreach programs. They are analogous to Norway’s public-private partnerships, covering part of the services a municipality would provide, and part of what a nonprofit might (BeLoved Asheville, 2024).



Two Individuals Stand Together in an Image Taken from BeLoved’s Street Outreach Page (BeLoved Asheville, 2024).

3.8

Sociological Analysis

Structural Functionalism

Under a functionalist analysis, the institution of BeLoved Asheville can be viewed as a mechanism which facilitates the transition of Asheville's community from a state of mechanical to one of organic solidarity. Durkheim's concept of **organic solidarity**, or "social order based around an acceptance of economic and social differences," matches closely with BeLoved's stated vision, and contrasts harshly with the idea of **mechanical solidarity**, or social order based on traditional customs and values (Conerly et al., 2021a). In a society currently held together by a form of mechanical solidarity marked by discrimination (particularly against those of low income and those struggling with homelessness) and growing wealth inequality, the steps BeLoved has taken to extend unconditional acceptance and equal opportunity to every citizen of Asheville reflect its function as an instigator of change in the social order—more specifically, change toward a more open-minded, organic solidarity.

Conflict Theory

From a conflict theorist's perspective, BeLoved Asheville may be seen to promote **class consciousness**, or "the awareness of one's rank in society" (Conerly et al., 2021a). The concept of class consciousness reflects Marx's belief that to produce social change, members of the proletariat must first become aware of their position in the social order and then work to improve it: "instead of just being an inert strata of society, the class could become an advocate for social improvements" (Conerly et al., 2021a). Class consciousness would, in his view, replace **false consciousness**, or the "condition in which the beliefs, ideals, or ideology of a person are not in the person's own best interest" (Conerly et al., 2021a), and are often those promulgated by the ruling class. By acknowledging structural forces that influence homelessness and working to address these causes, BeLoved both dismisses the ideas of false consciousness—that poverty is a choice, personal tragedies cause homelessness, etc.—and replaces them with a modern version of class consciousness, based on a communal sense of how structural forces affect individuals' places in society and a willingness to advocate for change.

3.9

Overall Growth

Over the course of this semester, I have begun to think much less about how individuals act to change the world around them, and more about how that world is influenced by broader patterns of many individual actions taken together. While I have tried to consider things from this perspective a little before taking this course (which is part of the reason I opted to take it in the first place), I have expanded it to encompass most of my views on society. Analyzing the symbolic meanings behind certain viral internet products or thinking about the potential material drivers behind attempted political assassinations as a conflict theorist might, for example, are things I would not have thought to do before taking this course. I have also become aware of how many ways there are to analyze the same aspect of society. Between the three major sociological paradigms and their many associated thinkers and theories, the same events could be interpreted in hundreds of different ways, none of which would necessarily be wrong. This complexity combined with sociology's resemblance to ecology—in that individuals are codependent with a larger, patterned structure—make it an incredibly interesting topic to me.

3.10

Why Understand Homelessness Sociologically?

As previously mentioned, there is a tendency particularly in the US to view homeless individuals as lazy, criminal, or ill, and to attribute their struggles to personal failures or unfortunate circumstances. These ideas can be incredibly dangerous, as they breed contempt and aggression towards those individuals, and can lead to draconian “solutions” to the problem such as those used in Grants Pass, which focus on punishing people for living in the street in hopes of driving them from one city to the next. Understanding homelessness sociologically is necessary to dispel the myth that it is a choice or a lifestyle, to begin addressing the structural causes of the issue, and to start building empathy for those experiencing it.

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