



## Social Interaction Types & Examples (Sociology)

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**Social interaction is any communication process between members of a society. Examples of social interaction include cooperation, conflict, social exchange, coercion, and conformity.**

**In sociological terms, it is defined as the process of reciprocal influence exercised by individuals over one another during a social encounter.**

According to Nisbet, there are five key types of social interaction:



- Cooperation
- Conflict
- Social exchange
- Coercion
- Conformity

Note that many researchers have tried to categorize different types of social interaction. What follows is a brief examination of one of the most common ways to divide types of social interaction.

**Contents** [ [show](#) ]

## Sociological Definition Of Social Interaction

**Social interaction is a fundamental unit of analysis within sociology. It describes the way people behave when they cross paths with someone else. Any interaction where an individual or a group does something to receive a reward is called social exchange (Nisbet, 1970, p. 56).**

Social interactions involve verbal and non-verbal communication.

Robert Nisbet (1970, p. 55) identified five types of social interaction: cooperation, conflict, social exchange, coercion, and conformity.

Nowadays, it is also common to see a different categorization.



Contemporary sociologists sometimes divide social interaction into the following five categories: exchange, competition, conflict, cooperation, and accommodation, where the latter is a middle-ground between cooperation and competition.

This gives us 10 types of social interaction, depending on the theorist:

<b>Nisbet's Typology of Social Interaction</b>	<b>Contemporary Typology of Social Interaction</b>
1. Cooperation	1. Exchange
2. Conflict	2. Competition
3. Social exchange	3. Conflict
4. Coercion	4. Cooperation
5. Conformity	5. Accommodation

## **Types Of Social Interaction In Sociology**

### **1. Exchange**

**Exchange is a type of social interaction where an individual or a group acts in a certain way toward another individual or group to receive a reward.**



The most common type of exchange relationship is between an employer and an employee. The employee has to behave according to the wishes of the employer if they want to receive a reward.

The reward doesn't need to be monetary or even material. The reward may be subjective and emotional.

## Exchange Interaction Examples

**An example of an exchange interaction is when an individual acts a certain way towards another to receive gratitude.**

Prominent social exchange theorists emphasize the importance of gratitude in social interactions (Homans, 1961 & Blau, 1964).

Helping an elderly person cross the street or giving money to a beggar might not seem like examples of social exchange, but in many cases, they could be. The person might be acting in this way to receive gratitude (Popenoe, 1977, p. 50).

Casual interactions between strangers and economic relationships are not the only place for social exchange.

**Relationships between lovers or friends often have an element of social exchange.**

This doesn't mean that one person loves another merely to receive their love back, but rather that there are times when a person in such a relationship acts to receive an emotional reward.

This reward could be as simple as an expression of love, gratitude, or recognition (Nisbet, 1970, p. 56).



## 2. Cooperation

**Cooperation is interaction in which individuals or groups act together to promote common interests or achieve common goals.**

These goals might be difficult or impossible to achieve individually. The group, therefore, finds that it is in everyone's interest to cooperate.

Cooperation can be divided into four types:

1. Spontaneous
2. Directed
3. Traditional, and
4. Contractual (Nisbet, 1970, pp. 60-62).

All social life is based on this type of social interaction. People work together to adapt to the environment and combat environmental threats such as global warming.

People work together to effectively meet individual needs. They work together to provide mutual protection from external threats. All societies largely rely on the existence of cooperation.

### Cooperation Interaction Examples

**Cooperation occurs within in-groups when working together can help develop greater rewards for the individuals than competition.**



For example, team members in a basketball team need to cooperate to achieve their common goal – to win the game. This may mean that one team member doesn't get to shoot the hoop, and instead assist the goal shooter with the aim of getting the overall greater benefit of winning the game as a team.

Similarly, teachers may cooperate by sharing resources or teaching time (i.e. peer teaching). Each cooperating teacher gets benefits by having to do less preparation, so working together has a clear benefit.

### **3. Competition**

**Cooperation is the direct opposite of competition. Competition is a type of social interaction that is recognized by some sociologists as belonging to its separate category.**

It occurs when the same limited object or goal is desired by several individuals or groups. The groups, instead of uniting, struggle against one another for the possession of some object or goal.

**According to Nisbet, cooperation and competition are more interrelated than we might realize.**

In actual practice, it is rare to see one without the elements of another (Nisbet, 1970, p. 60). In the example of a classroom given above, the pupils are still

likely to compete within the group, even if what they want is in their common interest.



Conversely, competing pupils might try to cooperate in solving some parts of the math problem to get to the final answer more quickly.

## Competition Interaction Examples

**An example of competition is when a teacher may present a math problem to a classroom.**

If the teacher declares that the first person to solve the equation will receive a reward, the pupils are likely to start competing with each other.

If the teacher declares that the entire classroom should work together to solve that problem and if they succeed each of them will receive a reward, the pupils are likely to start cooperating.

## 4. Conformity

**Conformity is all behavior that is in accord with the [social norms](#) and values of a given social group.**

All social organizations rely in part on the existence of this type of social interaction. We often hear the adjectives “conformist” and “nonconformist” applied to individuals.

But this categorization exists on a spectrum rather than being black and white.



An individual might seem nonconformist only because that individual conforms to the norms and values of a different social group rather than the one the observer is thinking of.

For example, a child that dresses in a special way might not seem to be conforming to the norms and standards of the society they are a part of, but they might be conforming to the norms and standards of their [subcultural group](#).

## Conformity Examples

**The most common [example of conformity](#) might be in politics. It is common to see an individual stop believing in something only because the political party they are affiliated with does not approve of that belief.**

A similar process takes place in friend groups, romantic relationships, family relationships, and so on.

Although some nonconformity can be explained as conformity to some other norm, experimental and historical evidence suggests that some people are generally less conformist than others, irrespective of what the norm is.

“Less” doesn’t mean that some individuals are simply not conforming at all: everyone, at least in some measure, is subject to manifestations of conformity (Nisbet, 1970, p. 64).

## 5. Coercion





**Coercion is behavior that is produced by compulsion of any form, which restricts the agency of one or more social actors.**

It might seem strange to classify coercion as a form of interaction since it seems like only one side is acting. Coercion is, nevertheless, nothing without the person or group being coerced.

Coercion manifests in different ways as an element of almost all social interaction. The threat of force is not a necessary component of all [coercive interaction](#).

So, for example, coercion may be imposed when the penalty for failure is ridicule, denial of love, denial of gratitude, denial of recognition, or something similar. Coercion is a common part of parenting and education.

According to Georg Simmel, coercion, although it seems revolting and oppressive, is often an irreplaceable support of the inner and outer life of an individual (Simmel, 1950, p. 299).

## Coercion Examples

**An example of a coercive relationship is that between a police officer and a member of the public who is being arrested.**

The member of the public is coerced – potentially by force – into complying with the police officer, who is granted the authority to use coercive force by the state.

Even in this extreme, there is an element of association, so it is an interaction rather than simply an instance of one person acting.



## 6. Conflict

**Conflict is a behavior where persons or groups struggle with each other for some scarce and commonly desired reward.**

Conflict seems to be, unfortunately, a form of social interaction that will never leave us. The existence of this type of social interaction often explains group cohesion.

A common problem is quite often a uniting force. Populations, for example, seem to unify under the threat of an external invasion.

There is no long-lasting relationship in which conflict does not take place. The conflict might be serious or small, tacit or acknowledged, but some forms of conflict are inevitable in virtually all human relationships.

Conflict can be seen as a larger category into which competition falls. It is rare to see conflicts without elements of cooperation and vice versa. Pure unification without any element of conflict is empirically unreal (Simmel, 1955, p. 15).

### Conflict Examples

[Examples of conflict](#) include interpersonal argument, workplace disagreements, and even peaceful protests. At a larger scale, we can see extreme conflicts emerging that lead to wars, sanctions, and armed insurgencies.

# Conclusion



The study of social interaction is one of the most crucial topics in sociology. It is, therefore, important to understand the commonly used categories for the types of social interaction.

In this article, we saw Robert Nisbet's classification as well as a more modern classification system. There are different classifications, of course, but that of Nisbet is probably the most commonly used today.

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