The Practical Skeptic

CORE CONCEPTS IN SOCIOLOGY

LISA J. McINTYRE

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Preface

It wasn't until I was about halfway through my first decade of teaching that I finally had the opportunity to teach Introduction to Sociology. Did I *want* to teach intro? You bet! I was ecstatic. I had been teaching various upper-division classes—research methods, social theory, criminology, law and society—but I wanted to be the one who introduced sociology to students. I wanted to share with students the enthusiasm that I felt for the entire sociological enterprise and to expose them to the power of sociological thought.

I tried to create an introductory course that would speak to the typical first-year student who isn't planning on majoring in sociology and, indeed, may not even know what sociology is. Even among sociology majors, very few plan on becoming sociologists. Each semester, I ask my beginning students, "Why are you here? What is it about sociology that interests you?" The very charitable say, "I don't know what sociology is, but I am sure that it will be interesting." Mostly, students are honest: "I'm here to fulfill my general education requirements." A few are more specific: "I have to take a social science class and my advisor said that sociology is easier than economics or political science."

I knew that once these students discovered sociology, they would find merit in it. Even if they didn't major in sociology, they would come away from the class with some important life knowledge. I quote Robert Bierstedt (1960) on my syllabus: "Sociology owns a proper place not only among the sciences, but also among the arts that liberate the human mind." I paraphrase Peter Berger (1963, 23) to suggest that students will find one of the most important lessons of sociology to be that "things are not what they seem"—that sociological training encourages people to look beyond the surface and to be suspicious of what "everybody

knows." I tell them that it hardly matters what sort of career they are working toward: Learning how to be skeptical and how to think like a sociologist will help them understand and resolve complex and abstract problems on the job.

So, I knew how I wanted to structure the course—we would learn the basic concepts and then talk and read about how these worked in the real world. But I couldn't find a textbook whose author had anticipated my wishes. I wanted a book that would introduce students to sociology's foundational concepts—the scientific method, culture, social structure, socialization, deviance, inequality. I wanted a book that would not bury those concepts inside of tons of empirical information, but would present them in such a way that students could gain enough understanding to apply them to what they read elsewhere and what they encountered in life. It was the sociological perspective I wanted these students to come away with, not the details.

I was encouraged to pursue this vision by something I read in an article by Frederick Campbell, a sociologist from the University of Washington. In the book he co-edited with Hubert Blalock and Reece McGee, Campbell wrote that undergraduate courses in sociology ought to focus on *principles rather than facts:* "The mastery of sociology has a different meaning in the context of undergraduate education than in vocational training or a graduate program. A baccalaureate degree in sociology seldom prepares a student for a specific occupation or to pursue independent research. Emphasis on the subject matter, then, has little value if it means memorizing material that will soon go out of date for a job that does not exist. Mastery should move away from factual material and focus instead on the development of the mind" (1985, 13).

The longer I taught introductory sociology, however, the greater became my frustration with the available instructional material. So, one summer, I sat down to write some introductory and background materials for my students. My idea was that I would introduce them to the concepts that sociologists use, and we would then apply these to what we read in a variety of sociological articles and to what we encountered in real life (and in the media). My goal was to provide my students with the tools they needed to understand the social world through the eyes of sociologists. As everyone who has taught introductory courses probably knows, the foundational concepts of our discipline are not simple ones, and many students resist them. My goal was not to simplify the concepts, but to make them accessible to students.

The set of essays I wrote that summer—on the history of sociology, the vocabulary of science, culture, social structure, social-

ization, deviance, and inequality—seemed to serve my students well. After students read them, we moved on with our shared vocabulary to other works by sociologists and to discussions of how these concepts applied to the real world. It worked. It was as Peter Berger had promised in his *Invitation to Sociology:* "It is not the excitement of coming upon the totally unfamiliar, but rather the excitement of finding the familiar becoming transformed in its meaning. The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives" (1963, 21). Although I omitted much that is found in the typical sociology text (there are no chapters on family, religion, or politics), the concepts I did focus on (institutions, roles, values, and so on) allowed us to have relatively sophisticated discussions of those topics.

Be warned: I am not one of those sociologists who write in what Peter Berger called "a barbaric dialect." I've taken C. Wright Mills's caution to heart: "To get beyond sociological prose we must get beyond the sociologist's pose." Notwithstanding the fact that I once had a book rejected by a noted university press because it was "too much of a good read," I've persisted in my casual style and, whenever I couldn't help it, have indulged my odd sense of humor. Many sociological concepts are very complex, and I think I have done justice to that complexity, but I have tried to do it in ways that are accessible to students.

INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL WITH TEST ITEMS

I have written an instructor's manual with test items. In addition to the usual test items (containing multiple choice, true/false, and essay discussion questions), I have included discussion questions and activities, examples of lectures, and tips specifically targeting new instructors.

THE PRACTICAL SKEPTIC: READINGS IN SOCIOLOGY

Created to serve as a companion to the text, *The Practical Skeptic: Core Concepts in Sociology,* this reader, *The Practical Skeptic: Readings in Sociology,* includes classic sociological writings as well as recent writings on fascinating topics of interest to students. Corresponding to the conceptual organization of the text, each of the readings serves to illustrate key sociological concepts and ideas. A separate printed test bank for the reader is available. It contains multiple choice, true/false, and essay discussion questions for each reading.

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Contents

Preface v

Introduction 1

So, What Is Sociology? 2

The Value of Sociology to Students 3

PART 1 GETTING STARTED IN SOCIOLOGY

Chapter 1 *Responding to Chaos: A Brief History of Sociology* 5

Inquiries into the Physical World 6

Technology, Urbanization, and Social Upheaval 10

The Origins of Modern Sociology in France: Émile Durkheim 12

EXCERPT: ÉMILE DURKHEIM, from *Suicide* (1897) and *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1904) 14

The Origins of Modern Sociology in Germany: Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber 15

EXCERPT: FERDINAND TÖNNIES, from *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (1887) 17

BOX: Karl Marx (1818–1883) 20

The Origins of Modern Sociology in England: Herbert Spencer 20

Sociology in the United States 23

The Place of Sociology in Modern Society 24

Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 25

Chapter 2 *The Sociological Eye* 27
The Focus on the Social 27
Skepticism 30
BOX: Nail Down That Distinction Between Manifest and Latent Functions! 31
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 33

Chapter 3 *Science and Fuzzy Objects: Specialization in Sociology* 34
Dividing Up the Task 36
Topic Area or Subject Matter 37
Theoretical Perspectives (Paradigms): Functionalism, Conflict, and Symbolic Interactionism 37
The Functionalist Paradigm 37
The Conflict Paradigm 38
The Symbolic Interactionist Paradigm 38
Which Paradigm Is Correct? 39
Levels of Analysis: Microsociology and Macrosociology 40
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 41

PART 2 TOOLS OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Chapter 4 *Who's Afraid of Sociology?* 42
The Empirical World and Inconvenient Facts 42
Ethnocentrism 44
Avoiding Ethnocentrism Can Be Difficult 47
Cultural Relativism 48
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 49

Chapter 5 *The Vocabulary of Science* 50
Variables 50
Hypotheses 52
Kinds of Variables: Independent Versus Dependent 54
Kinds of Relationships: Directionality 56
Operational Definitions 57
Tables and Figures 59
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 64

Chapter 6 *Doing Social Research 71*

Two Traditions: Quantitative and Qualitative Research 71

First Things First: The "Lit Review" 72

The Survey 74

Types of Survey Questions 75

The Art of Asking Questions 77

The Experiment 77

BOX: Six Guidelines for Crafting Survey Questions 78

BOX: Five Rules for Doing True Experiments 81

Observation 81

Unobtrusive (Nonreactive) Research 82

Artifacts 83

Use of Existing Statistics 84

Content Analysis 84

The Importance of Triangulation 85

Sampling 86

Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 88

Chapter 7 *Ethics in Research 90*

Ethics: Technical Meaning and Origins 90

Research Atrocities 93

BOX: The Nuremberg Code 95

The Case for Sociological Research 97

Institutional Review Boards: The Dawn of a New Era 100

BOX: The Nature of Informed Consent 101

How Heroic Must an Ethical Researcher Be? 101

Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 103

PART 3 THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Chapter 8 *Culture 105*

Material and Nonmaterial Culture 106

Nonmaterial Culture 106

Symbols 106

Language 107

Norms 108

Types of Norms 109

Sanctions 110
Values 110
BOX: What Do Americans Value? 111
BOX: Ponder 111
BOX: Ideology 112
Ideas and Beliefs 112
BOX: Statements of Belief 113
How It Adds Up 113
Culture as a Product of Action 113
Culture as a Conditioning Element of Further Action 115
BOX: Problems Identified and Resolved in All Known Cultures 115
Social Institutions 116
BOX: Examples of Crucial Societal Needs and Examples of Institutionalized Responses 117
Cultural Diffusion and Leveling 117
EXCERPT: MARGARET VISSER, from *Much Depends upon Dinner* (1986) 118
Subcultures and Countercultures 119
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 119

Chapter 9 *Social Structure 122*
Statuses 122
Roles 124
Tricky Situation 1: Role Strain 125
Tricky Situation 2: Status Inconsistency 125
Tricky Situation 3: Role Conflict 126
Master Status 127
Groups 128
Primary and Secondary Groups 129
Formal Organizations and Bureaucracies 131
Ideal-Type Bureaucracies 131
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 134

PART 4 PEOPLE IN SOCIETY

Chapter 10 *Socialization 137*
Nature and Nurture: Biological and Social Processes 137
How Socialization Works 139

The Looking-Glass Self: Charles Horton Cooley 139
The "I" and the "Me": George Herbert Mead 141
EXCERPT: GEORGE HERBERT MEAD, from *Play and Games in the Genesis of Self* (1934) 142
Family 145
School 147
Peer Groups 147
The Workplace 148
BOX: Rites of Passage 149
Resocialization and Total Institutions 150
BOX: Ponder 151
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 151

Chapter 11 *Deviance and Social Control 152*
The Relativity of Deviance (What We Already Know) 152
Nonsociological Theories of Deviance 154
Sociological Theories of Deviance: Émile Durkheim and Suicide 155
The Collective Conscience and Structural Strain 156
Egoism and Anomie 157
More Structural Strain: Robert Merton and Anomie 159
Anomie and Modern Social Structure 159
Responses to Anomie 160
Legitimate Versus Illegitimate Means 162
Learning to Be Deviant: Howard Becker's Study of Marijuana Use 163
Learning to Smoke 163
Learning to Perceive the Effects 164
Learning to Enjoy the Effects 165
The Societal Reaction Perspective: Labeling Theory 167
The Functions of Deviance 170
BOX: Ponder 171
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 171

PART 5 INEQUALITY

Chapter 12 *Stratification and Inequality 173*
Caste Systems 174

Estate Systems 177
EXCERPT: *A Year in the Life of a Peasant* 178
Class Systems 180
Theoretical Conceptions of Class 181
BOX: Ponder 182
Some Words About Slavery 185
Social Mobility and Open Versus Closed Systems 186
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 188

Chapter 13 *Inequality and Achievement: Social Class 190*
BOX: The Matthew Effect 194
Explaining Social Stratification 194
Cultural Explanations 195
Structural Explanations 196
The Pygmalion Effect: The Power of Expectations 202
The Fallacy of Hard Work 203
BOX: Ponder 205
Social Mobility and Social Structure 205
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 207

Chapter 14 *Inequality and Ascription: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender 209*
Why a Dollar Is Not Always a Dollar 210
Prejudice 214
Discrimination 215
Discrimination and "Isms" 217
The Social Construction of Minority Groups 222
Gender 225
Stop and Review: Answers and Discussion 228

References 229
Glossary/Index 237

Introduction

Have you ever caught yourself thinking about things that people do? Have you ever asked yourself, for example, questions about everyday things like these:

Why do some students always sit in the back of the classroom while others always sit in the front?

Why do African Americans on campus frequently say "hi" to other African Americans, even if they don't know them?

Why do we dress baby girls in pink and baby boys in blue?

Why do people generally not look at one another in elevators—and always face front?

Why do young men, but not young women, spit?

Why do we go to such lengths to pretend we aren't embarrassed when we have to get naked in front of a doctor?

Why do people from small towns tend to act differently from people from big cities?

Why are most people less willing to seek professional help for mental or emotional problems than for physical problems?

Sociologists are trained to find answers to questions about people's behavior. We are especially interested in understanding the effects that people have on one another.

Sociologists are convinced that much of people's behavior is a result of what other people do. If a sociologist reviewed the questions just listed, he or she would likely say that many of these behaviors result from how people are influenced by others.

This sociological conviction might offend you. Certainly I like to think of myself as independent-minded; you, too, may like to think that your behaviors are a result of choices you have made out of your own free will. But allow me to persuade you that to understand people's behavior and the choices they make, it is important to take into account the influence of others in their environment.

Even when we think we are making our own choices, often we are only picking from the fairly limited range of options that others allow us. The simple fact is that, depending on your position in society—your age, gender, race, social class, and so on—people expect and allow different things of you. Society places restrictions on your behavior with very little regard for your preferences.

Of course, you can choose not to live up to society's expectations, but if you decide to be contrary, you will pay a price. And, depending on the seriousness of your infraction, that price can range from endless nagging by your parents to a prison sentence and even to death!

Consider marriage. Surely the decisions whether to get married, whom to marry, and when are very *personal* decisions. Actually, they are not, really. Examine this matter carefully and you will find that your marital choices are rather restricted. For example, in the United States, you can only be married to one person at a time. And (at least for the time being) you can only marry a person of the opposite sex. Until the late 1960s, many states even had laws requiring people to marry within their own racial group—if you broke these laws, you could be sent to prison or exiled from the state.[1]

Chances are, your family places even more restrictions on your marriage choices. Have you noticed that there are, in effect, family "rules" about whom you can marry? These rules may be unspoken, but clear: Your parents may wish you to wed someone of your own race and religion and from the same educational and social class background. Of course, there is no *law* that says family rules must be followed, but we all know that families have ways of making us suffer.

Even your friends may restrict your marriage (and dating) choices. Consider how they would make you suffer if you started to date some seriously weird geek.

You really have to wonder, why does everyone care so much about who we marry? Now *that* is a sociological question!

So, What Is Sociology?

Here is a technical definition of sociology: *Sociology is the scientific study of interactions and relations among human beings.*

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[1]Some states have never rescinded these laws, but because such racial restrictions were ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967, even where they do exist, they do not have the force of law.

I hope the word "scientific" caught your attention. Including that word in the definition is a reminder that sociologists try to be very careful about how they find answers to their questions. Sociologists do not want their answers to be contaminated by bias or emotion or faulty logic. Therefore, as much as possible, they apply the scientific method to their sociological inquiries.

The Value of Sociology to Students

The goal of this book, and this course, is not so much to introduce you to new worlds as it is to inspire you to take a long hard look at familiar ones. And, I promise you, the reward for doing that will be much greater than the simple gratification of intellectual curiosity. There will be many practical rewards.

The practical value of taking a sociology course is that what you learn, by definition, *never will be irrelevant to your life*—present and future. Each of us lives in the social world; each of us is influenced by others and—to some extent—hopes to influence others. Studying sociology will strengthen your ability to understand how the social world operates and what your place is in it. Moreover, studying sociology will enhance your ability to act effectively in the social world.

Just to whet your appetite, let me share with you one of the most basic sociological truths as it was put into words in 1928 by the sociologist W. I. Thomas: "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." The *Thomas theorem* articulated the sociological finding that had escaped many nonsociological observers. If one truly wants to understand why people do the things they do, one must take into account not only what is *really* going on in a particular situation, but what people *think* is going on. For example, if moviegoers believe the theater is on fire, they will react to the threat as if it were real, even if there is no fire. A consequence could be a panic in which people died from being trampled to death, even though the threat was never "real."

Thomas's insight helps us to understand how people live their everyday lives, too. Suppose the local newspaper runs a series of articles on how people are being victimized by crimes. The reporters pick the most interesting and most gruesome of criminal events on which to focus. Even if the reality is that these are uncommon events and that the actual rate of crime is going down, we would predict that people's fear of crime would increase, which would have important consequences. For example, more people might purchase handguns for protection just at the point when things really are becoming safer. The increase in handgun ownership might result in an increase in handgun deaths—kids

playing with guns, panicked homeowners shooting neighbors stumbling around in the middle of the night, and so on.

Certainly reality is important, because even when people do not define things as real, they can have real consequences. Thus, even if people do not know that the theater is on fire they will die if they don't escape. But reality is only one of the things that we must take into account to understand how people act and interact.

Sociology, then, is the discipline that studies the interactions and relationships among people—the realities and the perceived realities. Even given the seemingly countless variations in people's possible behaviors, sociologists are remarkably successful in shedding light on questions about why people do what they do and how they are influenced by one another.

My goal in this book has been to select the most important concepts that sociologists use and share them with you. My hope is that you, too, might apply these concepts as you work to move about in the social world more effectively and to understand it more thoroughly.