



Joel M. Charon

Ten Questions

A Sociological Perspective

THIRD EDITION

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Joel M. Charon

Moorhead State University



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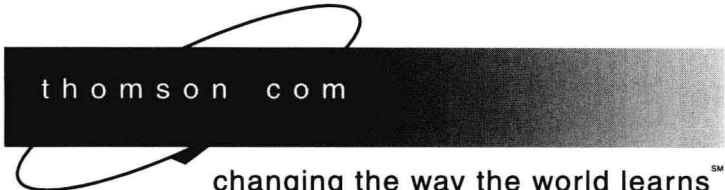
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Preface

Sociology is a perspective—that is, it is one way of thinking, one way of looking at and investigating the universe. It focuses on the human being as a member of society, so its questions should have importance to all of us who seek an understanding of who we are.

Ten Questions: A Sociological Perspective, third edition, is written for students in introductory sociology courses and for students who do not have enough time to take an entire sociology course but who still wish to understand how sociologists think. It is written for sociologists, who sometimes forget the excitement of sociology as they become involved in the tasks of teaching and research, and for critics of sociology, whose criticisms are too often without foundation. It is for English teachers, physicists, psychologists, artists, poets, and scholars, whose lives are filled with the same questions but whose approaches differ, and for all people who value education and believe, like the Greeks, that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

This book introduces the perspective of sociology by posing ten questions and then answering them, thereby revealing the sociological approach. Sociologists wonder about these questions regularly and most debate them with colleagues, students, or, at the very least, with themselves.

How do sociologists study society? Can we even see it? Won't our personal bias get in the way? Can we be scientific? What does it mean to be scientific?

What does it mean to be human? Is human nature something we possess at birth? Is our intelligence the key to humanity? Or is it our language, society, or culture? Just what is the human being, anyway?

How is society possible? What keeps it going? How is it possible for us to cooperate? Is it fear and force that keep us together, or do we simply like being around others?

Why are people unequal in society? It is human nature? Is inequality built into the nature of society? Is it possible to create a society of equality?

Why do we believe what we do? Are we in control of our beliefs? How does society shape them? Are our beliefs our own?

Are human beings free? Do we control our own lives? What are some of the forces that influence the decisions we make? What is freedom, anyway? Why is it so important for us to think we are free? Are some of us freer than others?

Why can't everyone be just like us? Why do we want others to be just like us? What are values? What is ethnocentrism? Is it good or bad? Are human beings really so different from each other?

Why is there misery in the world? What causes human problems? Why is life so difficult for people? How does society create its own problems? Is it possible to build a better society? Is misery inevitable?

Does the individual really make a difference? Is this simply wishful thinking? When can the individual really make a difference? What works against it? Why does society change?

Is sociology important? Important for what? Will it bring about a better world? A better understanding of self? A better understanding of society? Does it tell us anything important?

These are the ten questions that make up the chapters in this book. They are the most important questions that sociology helps me to answer. They are also the questions that make my intellectual life exciting.

In the second edition I added an Afterword. I wanted to add an eleventh question, but I did not want to change the title of the book to *Eleven Questions*, nor did I want to take out any of the original ten. Although some users of that second edition urged me to put it some-

where at the front of the book, I could not find a good place to put it, so I decided to keep it as it was in the second edition. Many instructors found that particular question very timely, and most liked the attempt to answer it. In truth, however, it is the eleventh question in a book entitled *Ten Questions*. As you will find, it is well-placed at the end of the book, because it can be easily inserted anywhere among the questions. Some will find it best to start with this question, some may use it in the middle, and still others may read it as a last chapter. It is a very difficult but important question. It addresses the most basic question that students have when they first encounter sociology: Because all human beings are unique, is it acceptable to generalize about them? (Isn't generalizing the same as stereotyping?) Shouldn't everyone be treated as an individual? Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and all social scientists generalize about people and society. Are they doomed to failure right from the beginning? The eleventh question is stated as simply:

Should we generalize about people?

The reader will find the answer difficult, interesting, and useful.

A basic assumption underlies this book—that students will enjoy discussing and wondering about such questions. They will recognize education to be more than accumulating facts. And if challenged to debate issues that shed light on the human being, students will discover a fervor in learning that is too often ignored.

This was an exciting project for me. It forced me to make explicit my assumptions about the nature of sociology. The encouragement I received from reviewers was gratifying, and their suggestions for improving the manuscript were invaluable. Especially important were Arnold Arluke, Northeastern University; Laura Fischer-Leighton, Vanderbilt University; Laurel Graham, University of South Florida; Rachel Kahn-Hunt, San Francisco State University; Craig B. Little, SUNY-Cortland; David E. Olday, Moorhead State University; Ronnelle Paulsen, University of Texas, Austin; and Robin Roth, Lesley College.

The Afterword was difficult to write, but several friends were very helpful. I am especially indebted to Ted Gracyk, Mark Fasman, Ralph Levitt, Helen Levitt, Bill Jones, and my nephew, Michael Segal. The following reviewers contributed to the final product of this third edition through their criticisms and recommendations: Susan Allbee, University of Northern Iowa; Philip L. Berg, Univer-

sity of Wisconsin–La Crosse; Glenn Currier, El Centro College; and Jan E. Dizard, Amherst College.

I also thank Serina Beauparlant, whose encouragement and confidence in me contributed a great deal to the final product. I also appreciate very much the help and encouragement given me by Eve Howard, my editor at Wadsworth.

I owe much to all those people in my life who debated these questions with me and introduced me to the complexities and wonders of the sociological perspective: my professors at the University of Minnesota, my fellow students in graduate school, and some of my colleagues at Moorhead State University. It is wonderful to discuss these questions and create a real commitment to sociology as a perspective.

I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Susan, who helps make my life worth living, and to my sons, Andrew and Daniel, whose individuality makes me feel proud.

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Introduction

All good questions deserve good answers. Good answers require knowledge. Good teachers give good answers, good parents do, and so do good lawyers, tax advisers, doctors, and candidates for office.

A good academic discipline also gives good answers. Often, however, these answers are tentative, limited, and complex. And sometimes they raise more questions than they answer because almost all academic knowledge results from evidence that is painstakingly gathered and then repeatedly criticized. Answering academic questions entails care, debate, and uncertainty, whether we are dealing with physics and chemistry, art and mathematics, or philosophy, psychology, and sociology.

That is one reason this book was so difficult to write. I did not want to misrepresent the discipline of sociology, for which I have great respect. I realized that many of my answers were far too simple and that I would be hard put to find all—or even most—sociologists fully agreeing with them. Throughout, I worried, Are these the answers that most sociologists would give? By now, however, I realize that *Ten Questions* is *not* a book of answers. *It is much more a book about thinking.* Although all sociologists might not agree with the answers in this book, most would probably agree that it describes how sociologists think.

This book does not describe either the specific ideas that sociologists examine or the many scientific studies that characterize the discipline. It does not present the various specialties and schools of thought that make up the discipline, and it does not show how sociologists disagree on many matters. Instead, it is intended to be an intellectually tantalizing introduction to a way of thinking that you can apply to your most important concerns. The ten questions I consider are among the most important ones that sociologists investigate. Indeed, they are fascinating questions that thinking people will

investigate throughout their lives. They form the basis for much of what a serious education should investigate.

As you will shortly see, the sociological perspective is different from how many people—maybe even you—usually see reality. We live in a society that emphasizes the individual and tends to look for the reasons for action within individuals. Our religious and political heritage and our tendency to focus on psychology too often cause us to overlook the importance of society in understanding human life. Whereas most people emphasize personality, character, heredity, and individual choice when they discuss human beings, the sociologist keeps crying out to us, “Don’t forget society! Remember, human beings are social, and that makes a difference in what we all are.”

I cannot escape the power of sociology to affect the way I think. Like almost everyone else, I am repulsed by violent crimes. Injustice and inhumanity upset me. War and murder, exploitation and physical abuse, racism and sexism, theft and the destruction of property, feeding other people’s addictions and refusing to help the poor—all of these anger me, and frankly, that anger caused me to become a sociologist. But sociologists’ approaches to such problems are different from those of most others. Again and again we ask, “In what kind of *society* does this happen? What *social conditions* cause individuals to lose their humanity? What are the *social causes* of poverty, crime, and destructive violence?”

Whenever I read or hear about a horrible crime, my first reaction is, “What a horrible thing to happen!” My second reaction is, “How can people do that? What’s wrong with them?” But then I often get to a third reaction, one that takes more self-discipline and care: “What are the underlying reasons for such acts? From what kind of world does inhumanity such as this arise?” As a sociologist, I am driven to understand the nature of society (including my own), and I try to appreciate all the different ways in which society affects the human being. Of course, I know that this is not the only way to understand human action, but I believe that it goes a long way.

To introduce the sociological perspective, as mentioned, I have decided to focus on ten questions. To me, questions such as these make sociological investigation exciting. When all is said and done, when we look at all the studies and all the detailed sociological knowledge we have gathered for more than 150 years, these are still the questions that stand out and excite discussion and argument within the discipline: How can sociologists study society? What does it mean to be human? How is society possible? Why is there in-

equality in the world? Why do we believe what we do? Are human beings free? Why can't everyone be just like us? Why is there misery in the world? Does the individual really make a difference? Is sociology important?

Throughout this book I will draw from the works of several important sociologists. These writers have had the greatest impact on my own thinking. Their ideas are the most exciting and meaningful to me, so I will briefly introduce them at this time.

Sociology owes much to the work of Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marx, of course, is best known for *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867), both of which are critiques of capitalism and the rest of society as he knew it. Marx was dissatisfied with how his society functioned; out of that dissatisfaction (which really amounted to great anger), he developed a theory of society that focuses on social class, social power, and social conflict. Marx's analysis is challenging to what most Americans believe, and he brought to sociology a critical and sophisticated approach to understanding society. Underlying all that he wrote was the idea that *social inequality* is the key to understanding society.

No one has influenced the development of the sociological perspective more than Max Weber (1864–1920), a German social thinker best known for *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In this work he shows us that Protestant religious thinking was a central contributing factor to the development of capitalism in the West. Like almost everything else he wrote, this book exhibits Weber's interest in describing the importance of *culture* in influencing how people act. People behave the way they do, he argues, because of this shared belief system, and the only way in which social scientists can understand a people's actions is to understand their culture. That is why he is so important for the study of religion, modernization, legitimate authority, bureaucratization, science, and tradition, all particular ways of *thinking* that characterize people living together. If we think of Marx as the critical sociologist, we should think of Weber as the *cultural sociologist*. This view is slightly misleading, however, because Weber was broader than that; like Marx, he was deeply interested in social class, social power, and social conflict.

When the name of Emile Durkheim comes up in discussion, my thinking immediately shifts to "social order." Durkheim (1858–1917) was driven to understand all the various ways in which society is able to work as a unity. Society, he maintains, is not simply a bunch of individuals; it constitutes a larger whole, a reality that is

more than the sum of the individuals who make it up. What keeps it together? How is this unity maintained? Durkheim documents the important contributions of religion, law, morals, education, ritual, the division of labor, and even crime in maintaining this unity. Every one of his major works examines it. His most famous work, *Suicide* (1897), for example, shows how very low or very high levels of social solidarity result in high suicide rates. His last important work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915), documents the importance of religion, ritual, sacred objects, and other elements of the sacred world for social solidarity. Durkheim also contributed greatly to our appreciation of the influence of social forces on the individual, from suicide to knowledge of right and wrong.

In many ways sociology owes its perspective to the work of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. Two other sociologists, both from the United States, appear now and then in the following chapters. Both have taught me much about the social nature of the human being, and especially about the power our social life has over the way we think. George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), a social psychologist who taught at the University of Chicago, has been extremely important in helping me understand the many complex links between society and the human being. His most important contribution to sociology is the book *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), which was written from his lecture notes by devoted students after his death. Throughout his work, certain questions are addressed over and over: What is human nature; that is, what characterizes the human being as a species in nature? How does society shape the human being? How does the individual, in turn, shape society? Mead persuasively shows that human beings are unique because of the way they use symbols to communicate and think about their own acts and the acts of others. They are also unique because of their ability to reflect on themselves as objects. To Mead, symbol use, selfhood, and mind are qualities that create a being who can change society and not simply be passively shaped by it. The individual's relationship with society is complex, however, because symbols, self, and mind are socially created qualities, possible only *because* we are social beings.

The other American sociologist is Peter Berger (b. 1929), who, along with Mead, has had a tremendous impact on my own thinking about the meaning and importance of sociology. *Invitation to Sociology* (1963) and *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) (written in collaboration with Thomas Luckmann) describe sociology as a special type of consciousness, a perspective that is profound, unusual,

critical, and humanistic in its concerns. To Berger, sociology is liberating because it helps to reveal our taken-for-granted realities for what they are: social creations that appear true on the surface but on closer inspection are usually found to be partially true or even untrue. In all of his work Berger shows the power of society to shape human action and thought. Society socializes the human being to accept its ways. To understand the power of society is, for Berger, the first step toward understanding who we are and what we can do to control our own lives.

What I write here is hardly ever my own idea, because it is so heavily influenced by people such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead, and Berger. This book is inspired by all of these thinkers—and others—so I hope that if you like it, you will turn your attention to their works. I also hope that you will find in them the inspiration that I have found.

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