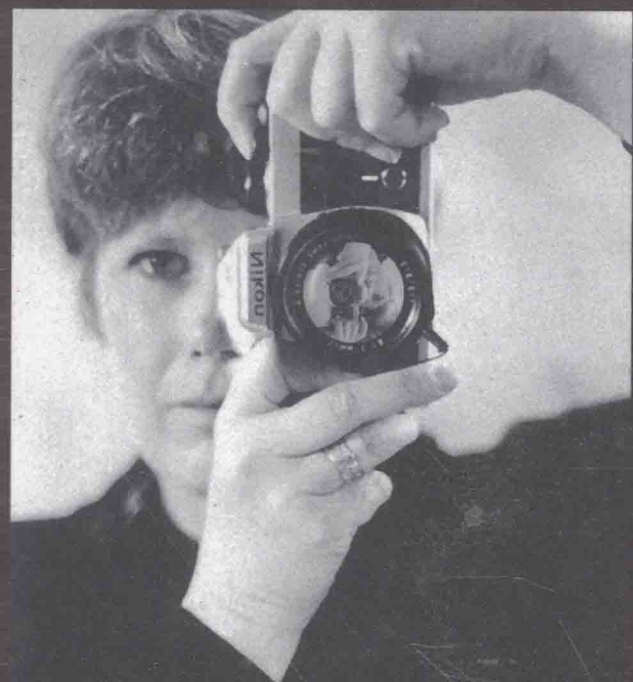


Seeing Social
Structure and
Change in
Everyday Life



SOCIOLOGICAL SNAPSHOTS³

JACK LEVIN

SOCIOLOGICAL

SNAPSHOTS

3

Seeing Social Structure and
Change in Everyday Life

JACK LEVIN

Northeastern University

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■ ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

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Preface

Sociology is a vitally exciting field. You may know that and I may know that. The trick is getting our students to realize it. Usually, instructors who teach introductory sociology hope that they will develop in their students some enthusiasm for the contributions of the field, but the question is always *how*.

I wrote this book with at least two specific outcomes in mind, both of which relate to the general goal of getting the students to understand and appreciate the sociological perspective:

1. To serve as a springboard to more abstract thinking about society
2. To encourage student interest in learning more about the field of sociology

It is an important function of sociology to help broaden the educational experience of all college students, but especially those in fields of study that may be narrow in scope and purpose. One measure of the effectiveness of an introductory sociology course is the extent to which students come to view their world with a sociological eye.

When students truly “see” the sociology in things, they are also being helped to develop their abstract thinking skills—the very skills that are of vital importance in any job or career. Unfortunately, students too often get little help from their introductory courses in enhancing their ability to think at an abstract level. Instead, they are asked to read and memorize long lists of terms that seem more to obfuscate and complicate than to clarify reality.

The snapshots in this book are casual and informal, but they are designed to ease students into the formal world of sociological analysis. Each essay relates some abstract sociological concepts to the concrete problems confronting ordinary people. Social structure and social change are introduced as major variables but almost always in the context of everyday life.

At the same time, the snapshots are grounded in sociological data and theorizing. The introductory essays that lead each section are

intended to emphasize the importance of the formal sociological literature. Indeed, the entire book serves as a springboard from the informal, concrete world of the student to the more formal, abstract world of sociological theory and method.

Students also need active ways for developing their ability to see and articulate abstractions and for analyzing data about social reality. The physical and biological sciences usually include a “lab” component in their courses in which students are given an opportunity for hands-on experience. Sociologists should attempt, wherever possible, to do the same.

For this reason, each section of the book contains ideas for student writing and research assignments. There is nothing fancy or complicated about the proposed tasks. They are designed to get introductory students to begin to write from a sociological perspective or to collect data about their everyday lives. We can only hope that they will decide to go on to bigger and better sociological things.

To the extent that the first outcome is realized, students will, I hope, also achieve the second: They will be eager to learn more about the sociological perspective. Some will take more sociology courses or even major in the discipline.

Unlike the situation in many other fields, sociology simply cannot depend on students’ prior familiarity with the study of behavior to provide a background of information or enhance their interest. In high school, very few had the opportunity to select a sociology course. Some may have a vague idea that sociologists study human behavior or that sociology is somehow related to social work, but that’s about it.

Partly as a result of their lack of familiarity, only a small number of students declare a sociology major when entering college: More typically, students who enroll in introductory sociology courses represent a range of disciplines and interests. It is, therefore, a major function of the introductory sociology course—for many undergraduates, perhaps their only point of formal contact—to convince students to take upper-level courses in the field. This places a special burden on instructors to provide a positive learning climate—one in which student interest is encouraged.

Writing the third edition of *Sociological Snapshots* has given me a chance to make some important changes. Most of the snapshots found in the second edition have been retained, although several have been placed in a different section, modified, or updated. More-

over, there are nine new snapshots in this edition, some of which were written specifically for the book.

A number of people were important in making *Sociological Snapshots* 3 a reality. At *Bostonia*, I am grateful to Laura Freid, who gave me the opportunity to write a regular column on behavior for a first-rate magazine; to Keith Botsford, who permitted me to carry on the tradition; and to Lori Calabro and Janice Friedman, under whose skillful editorship the quality of my writing always improved. I also thank David Gibson at *Northeastern University Magazine* for helping me to write the essay concerning the sociology of soap operas. Rachelle Cohen encouraged me to do "Americans Are Moving to the Margins of Society" for the *Boston Herald*, and Marjorie Pritchard encouraged me to write "Who's Minding the Kids?" for the *Boston Globe*.

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My colleague Arnie Arluke deserves a special note of praise for suggesting the title of this book. Jamie Fox and Bill Levin were generous with both their encouragement and their ideas. Christie White was an outstanding research assistant.

Steve Rutter of Pine Forge Press made all the difference. If he made me slave over a hot PC, then it was worth every minute. No editor could have done more.

My wife, Flea, and my children, Michael, Bonnie, and Andrea, have been more than patient, tolerating all of my idiosyncrasies.

As in earlier editions, I dedicate this book to the thousands of students I have had the pleasure of teaching. They have taught me a great deal about sociology and about life.

JACK LEVIN
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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THE SOCIOLOGICAL EYE

Among my several hobbies, photography is my favorite. I've never tried to take formal or posed pictures. Instead, the heart of my interest—what I have always found most satisfying—is the art of taking “snapshots”—informal, often candid, photos of everyday life. I particularly enjoy capturing on film the problems experienced by ordinary people as well as the spontaneous, unguarded moments in the lives of loved ones.

The essays in this book are snapshots, too, but they are sociological snapshots. Each one is a “3 × 5 glossy” of a social situation encountered by the people we meet every day—the circumstances of ordinary people caught up in ordinary (and, occasionally, not so ordinary) social events. You will find essays about family and class reunions, television soap operas, behavior in elevators, children who have unpopular names, people who do the dirty work in occupations, bystander apathy, people who act in deviant ways while driving in automobiles, heartburn, fads through the generations, popular rumors about shopping malls, contemporary images of fat people, and so on. At the extreme end, you will also discover a few essays concerning topics such as the death penalty, mass killers, and hate crimes (sadly, in today's society, even ordinary people have to be aware of such extraordinary topics).

The essays in this book are snapshots in another sense as well: Most take a casual, informal approach with respect to the presentation of statistical evidence. Many appeared originally in *Bostonia* (a magazine of “culture and ideas”). Others were opinion pieces that I earlier published in newspapers. Some were written specifically for this book. But all of them were designed to bridge the gap existing between the “two cultures” of academic sociology and everyday life. As a result, in every snapshot, you will find a mix of both social science and journalism. There are very few references, quantitative data, and formal evidence, the kind that you typically expect to find in an introductory sociology textbook. Sometimes, the essays in the book present only anecdotal confirmation—illustrations and examples rather than hard, statistical fact. Some are speculative pieces about changes in society or about the future. Others seek to throw a new perspective on aspects of society that may have seemed obvious to you before. None is meant to replace the technical journal articles written for professional sociologists. All are meant to motivate students, to help them see the contribu-

tion of the sociological approach, and to ease them as gently as possible into the more formal world of sociological analysis.

After teaching classes in sociology for a number of years, I have noticed that many students are troubled by what they regard as the abstractness of sociological insight. They often complain about not being able to see how social structure touches their everyday lives or how culture contributes to ordinary events. No longer are they asked to examine the structure of individuals but of entire groups, organizations, institutions, communities, or societies.

What I believe is missing, from a pedagogical viewpoint, are the snapshots of culture and social structure that bridge the gap existing in many students' minds between what may appear to be vast sociological abstractions, on the one hand, and everyday experiences, on the other. Hence, the central purpose of this book: to relate abstract sociological concepts to the concrete problems confronting ordinary individuals in our society.

But please don't be fooled into believing that these snapshots represent the personal opinions of the author alone. On the contrary, all of them are based on either sociological thinking, sociological data, or both. The essays that introduce each section of the book and the annotated suggested readings at the end ("Focus: Suggestions for Further Reading") are meant to emphasize the importance of the sociological literature. Indeed, they direct the student to it. You will find that the suggested readings include not only the more formal sources on which the snapshots were based but also important general works from the sociological literature. I have tried to describe them in enough detail so that interested students will understand *why* they might be worth reading. Once again, no snapshot is meant to replace the technical journal articles—the formal portraits—written for professional sociologists, but all are grounded in them.

Nor was this book written to replace your standard introductory text. Instead, *Sociological Snapshots* was intended to serve as a springboard into the formal course material, whether presented in a single text or as a series of monographs. To move back and forth between levels of abstraction, each section of the book has been organized in a consistent format. First, there is an introductory essay in which the basic sociological concepts are defined, discussed, illustrated, and then linked with the snapshots for that particular section. Second, there are the snapshots themselves. Next, there

are suggestions for further reading, extensively annotated (see the Bibliography for publication information for each reading). Finally, there are ideas for student writing and research assignments in “Developing Ideas.” By the way, most of these assignments require the students to apply a sociological eye to their everyday lives or to *begin*, in a preliminary way, to collect data using a sociological method.

There is one final sense in which the essays in this book are snapshots. They often reflect, frequently in an explicit way, the ideas that the *photographer* considers to be valuable or problematic. In taking pictures of the world around me, I often take photos of my family and friends, and occasionally of the unusual circumstances of daily life, but always with a point of view implicit in my choice of subject. In other words, my snapshots are, in part, a reflection of my values—the things that I appreciate or cherish. They are often addressed to preserving and understanding the images of the people I love, the problems in everyday life that bother me, or the things I believe need changing.

Like all “scientists,” sociologists have values. They are human beings too; they have grown up in a particular social setting and have been exposed selectively to certain kinds of ideas.

Max Weber, a turn-of-the-century German sociologist who contributed a great deal to our understanding of religion, inequality, and social change, strongly believed that sociology could be *value free*. He fully recognized that the subjects sociologists chose to study were frequently influenced by their personal values. For example, it would not be surprising that a sociologist who grew up in extreme poverty might decide to study inequality, a rape victim might conduct research into the causes of sexual violence, an African American sociologist might specialize in race relations, and so on.

But when Weber talked about value-free sociology, he wasn’t really talking about the selection of a subject about which to conduct research. Instead, he meant that sociologists must not permit their values, their biases, or their personal opinions to interfere with their analysis of that subject. They must, instead, attempt to be objective in collecting and analyzing information; they must seek out and consider *all* of the evidence, even evidence that might contradict their personal opinions. Weber would have advised that we must let the chips fall where they may. I hope my personal biases

have determined only the subjects of my snapshots, not the conclusions that I reach about them.

Now that you understand the *snapshot* part of the title of this book, *Sociological Snapshots 3*, I ask that you stop a moment longer and consider the *sociological* part as well. As you probably already surmise—even if you have never taken a course in psychology—it deals with the behavior and personality of *individual* human beings. Psychologists might study a person's attitudes, hostility, attractiveness, moods, helpfulness, learning style, prejudices, and so on. In contrast, sociologists focus not on any one individual but on what happens *between* two or more individuals when they interact. Sociologists might study the relationship between husband and wife, interaction in a small task group at work, the peer groups in a high school, family relations, prison culture, relations between managers and workers, and so on.

To explain the unique and important contribution of sociology, allow me to reveal a little bit about my everyday routine. Every time I drive from my suburban home to my office in the city, I think about how painfully predictable and orderly my daily commuting routine has become. I live some 25 miles from downtown, so I have plenty of time, while sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic, to think. In my darker, more impatient moments, I play “what if” games: What if I had sold my house and moved into the city? What if I were teaching in a college located in a remote, rural area? What if I had taken the train into work? What if I could change my schedule to avoid the rush hour commute? *Would I still be stuck in traffic? Probably not.*

As a sociologist, I am particularly interested in the fact that my predicament is shared by so many other people. This, of course, explains why traffic jams happen on a daily basis. Tens of thousands of residents have similar work schedules, live in the suburbs, and drive their cars to work in the city. They get up at about the same time every morning, take a shower, brush their teeth, and have a cup of coffee. Then, they take to the roads—most of them at the same time that I do!

Sociologists seek to understand the predictable and *patterned* aspects of what happens between people when they get together; sociologists even have a term for it: *social structure*. And in the case of sitting in maddening bumper-to-bumper traffic every day, social structure has become my biggest headache.