

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL LIFE

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY



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PREFACE

Our many years of teaching both large and small classes of introductory sociology have bred more than a little dissatisfaction with textbook offerings. Large reference-type texts contain more material than can be covered in a one-semester course. Moreover, few students are pleased about purchasing an expensive text, much of which won't even be assigned. In contrast, our experience with mini-texts is that often they are so brief they fail to show students how basic sociological ideas can be applied and how sociological analysis is undertaken. Simplistic styles of presentation lull students into believing that they've grasped complex ideas, when they have not.

This eleven-chapter treatment has a number of unique features, the result, in part, of a topical reshuffling of the sociological deck. First, like most of the larger texts, theory and research are given early placement in a separate chapter (Chapter 2). Second, unlike many basic sociology texts, this book does not confine the treatment of social institutions to a few chapters at the end of the book. Rather, institutional analysis (of family, religion, education, and others) provides illustrations throughout the book. Our closest attempt at an "institutions" chapter (Chapter 5) contains an in-depth analysis of the most important of all institutions, the family. Third, a number of topics that normally receive chapter-length treatment in larger books are examined here in two chapters on social change (Chapters 10 and 11). Among these topics are social movements, demography, technology, urbanization, and bureaucracy.

Surely any basic text attempts to combine traditional concepts with illustrations from contemporary research and current events. Our focus on traditional concepts should be readily apparent, with culture, social structure, social psychology, deviance, social stratification, and status relations (minorities) all receiving chapter-length examinations. We've attempted to create a text that provides illustrations and examples drawn from the life experience of today's students. Applications and case study sections at the end of each chapter are designed to provide a special edge in showing students how basic sociological concepts are "alive" in everyday events and social issues. In the midst of it all, one reviewer noted: "It may not show from the table of contents, but these people really have tried to do something different here." We hope that difference will help open the door to sociological thinking for the students who read the book.

If occasionally it is important for students to know who said what, it is equally important for them to know *when* certain things were said. Accordingly, reference materials are cited by their original dates of publication with current edi-

tions and translations noted in the individual bibliographic entries at the end of each chapter. In matters of English usage and style, we've opted for the Chicago Manual of Style rather than the *Time* magazine version of the language. We hope this book will demonstrate to students that standard English grammar and usage still are powerful tools for clear and concise communication.

We've incurred many debts in the process of inventing this book. Classroom reactions of students, both at Connecticut College and the University of Connecticut, have been invaluable in helping us understand what does and does not "work." We wish to thank Connecticut College in New London, Connecticut, for the luxury of a year's sabbatic leave for Boudreau, during which the key elements of the book were conceptualized. The people at West Educational Publishing have shaped this book in more ways than we can count. We are pleased to thank editor Clark Baxter, developmental editor Joe Terry, Caroline Ries who copyedited the text, Sarah Bennett in promotions, and production editor Kara ZumBahlen, whose skills with manuscripts and people transformed a lot of ink on paper into this book.

We also have had sound counsel from peers who reviewed successive drafts of the manuscript. We are pleased for the opportunity to thank Ansaruddin Ahmed (Monroe Community College), Ben Austin (Middle Tennessee State University), Susan Blackwell (Delgado Community College), Jacqueline Boles (Georgia State University), Diana A. Bustamante (New Mexico State University), Jerry Clavner (Cuyahoga Community College), Lois Easterday (Onondaga Community College), David Edwards (San Antonio College), Irwin W. Epstein (University of Missouri—Rolla), Christopher C. Ezell (Vincennes University), Rudolph C. Harris (Des Moines Area Community College), Gary Hodge (Collin County Community College), Fred O. Jones (Simpson College), Michael Keen (Indiana University at South Bend), Michael Kleiman (University of South Florida), Jerry Lewis (Kent State University), Anthony V. Margavio (University of New Orleans), Gloria J. Milton (Glendale Community College), Carole A. Mosher (Jefferson Community College), Gustave G. Nelson (Berkshire Community College), Brother Tri Van Nguyen (LaSalle University), S. Fernando Rodriguez (University of Texas—El Paso), Rita Phyllis Sakitt (Suffolk County Community College), William Spinrad (Adelphi University), George F. Stine (Millersville University), Ralph W. Wedeking (Iowa Central Community College), and Ronald T. Wohlstein (Eastern Illinois University).

Finally, we wish to thank a large black Newfoundland named Dury who waited patiently through much of the writing, and from time-to-time beckoned us to "come and play" when she either got bored or sensed that comic relief was in order. Woof!

FAB & WMN
July 4, 1992
Norwich, Connecticut

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES**WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?**

Turning to the first chapter in any introductory textbook is very much like being parachuted into an unknown foreign land. The language is different. You don't know how to get from one place to the next. It is not altogether clear what kinds of things can be taken for granted, or what sorts of things you are expected to know. Each of the chapters in this text begins with a discussion of learning objectives and concludes with a chapter summary. These might be viewed as a road map for your excursion into the field of sociology. More specifically, the discussion of learning objectives focuses upon the questions that are addressed in each chapter and thus identifies the kinds of issues with which you should be conversant after studying the chapter. The chapter summary provides the central themes that answer these questions as well as the concepts from which the answers are constructed.

Chapter one examines the question, what is sociology? What sorts of things do sociologists study, and for what purpose? Why is sociology both a basic and an applied science? This chapter will introduce you to the art and science of sociological analysis. It examines some of the historical developments that led to the blossoming of the science of sociology in this, the latter half of the twentieth century. Finally, this chapter examines some differences between the sociological view of social reality and everyday understandings of social life.

After reading and studying this chapter you should be able to discuss answers to the following questions:

1. What is sociology, and why should anyone bother studying it?
2. What kinds of things do sociologists study?
3. What are the most important features of the subject matter of sociology, social reality?
4. How may sociology be understood as both an art and a science?
5. What are the social and historical conditions that have given rise to the sociological perspective?
6. How can sociology be both a basic and an applied science?
7. Why do some people find sociological insights difficult to understand, and how can these barriers to thinking sociologically be overcome?

THE SOCIOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE

Frequently, in both the popular press and the electronic media, the term "sociology" is heard in connection with such issues as family violence, poverty, and

crime. The impression emerges that the only phenomena in which sociologists are interested are social arrangements that somehow don't work properly. While it is true that these sorts of social problems are of interest to sociologists, they are only one part of what sociologists study. This popular view of sociology as simply the study of social problems does not begin to capture the complexity of the sociological enterprise. Accordingly, the first questions addressed in this book are what is sociology? why do we bother studying it? and what types of things do sociologists study? The first section of this chapter provides some preliminary answers to these questions, answers that are explored in greater depth in the remaining sections of the chapter.

SOCIOLOGY DEFINED

Sociology is the scientific study and interpretation of social life. It is a science because, like all basic sciences, it is guided by specific rules of investigation and has the goal of explaining what is found. It is interpretative because the "facts" of scientific work rarely speak for themselves. All sciences involve interpreting what is found. For instance, most persons have had an X-ray taken at one time or another. But, an X-ray picture of the body means little until an expert interprets the picture and declares its meaning and significance. Ultimately, the X-ray technician and the physician determine whether the picture taken indicates disease or health, cause for deep concern, or nothing about which to worry. Similarly, social phenomena involve meanings and require interpretation.

Sociology

For instance, the birth rate in country "B" may be many times greater than that in country "A." But, what are the consequences of that high birth rate? What will it mean in the future for the people living in country "B?" It may not immediately be apparent to the people in country "B" that a high birth rate may mean a scarcity of food and health services, that in the context of economic scarcity, they may experience starvation, high infant death rates, and other social miseries. Interpretation always is an important part of the scientific act.

Sociology investigates and seeks to explain *social* reality. The sociologist wishes to know how and why social arrangements and social patterns are as they are. This emphasis upon the word "social" means that sociology is not a study of individual persons, but rather the study of individuals as participants in collective patterns of social life. Thus, the subject matter of sociology includes all the things that people do, think, and feel that involve or result from life with other people. Said differently, sociology focuses upon the ways in which social conditions and social settings influence human thought, feelings, and behavior. Our thoughts, actions, and feelings are intelligible and "make sense" because of meanings we attach to them, meanings that are shared with other persons in society.

MICRO- AND MACROSOCIOLOGY

In their approach to the study of social reality, sociologists focus upon different levels of social phenomena, resulting in what is called micro- and macrosociology. Micro- and macro- refer to the size and scope of the phenomena to be investigated. For example, some sociologists focus upon the characteristics of total societies, and even world systems of events. *The study of large-scale social*

Macrosociology

phenomena is called macrosociology. There are many important questions at this level of analysis. How do societies develop? How are they organized, and how do they change? How do the patterns of social structure in one society compare to those of another? Are there processes of social development that affect all societies similarly? How do certain predominant themes in cultural values or political ideology shape societies differently? Why do some societies produce more dramatic and severe patterns of social inequality, poverty, and wealth than others? Different as these questions may be, they all involve studying and analyzing rather large-scale social phenomena, and thus, all are instances of macrosociology.

Microsociology

On the other hand, some sociologists prefer to study small-scale social units, such as the development of the social self, family relationships, friendship groups, or classroom patterns. *This study of small-scale social units is called microsociology.* There are many important and interesting sociological questions at this level of analysis as well. How are people shaped and influenced by cultural patterns and social structural settings? Do different societies produce qualitatively different types of persons? How does the social self develop? What are the processes through which individuals adopt the traditions and values of society? What leads to conformity in some persons and deviance in others? What kinds of interactions occur in different microsocial settings? For example, how does the number of persons in a small group affect the sorts of relationships between persons? Small-group sociologists have found that as groups increase in size from dyads, to triads, to quadrads, and larger groups, people's communication patterns change and their degree of satisfaction arising from group participation decreases.

Additionally, microsociology examines the emergence, change, and consequences of meaning systems. For instance, why do various religious cults and sects behave differently, with some retreating from society into self-contained communes, while others send out missionaries to seek converts and spread the "good news?" These are but a few illustrations of the smaller-level phenomena studied by microsociologists.

Between these two levels of analysis, of course, lies a broad range of social phenomena not easily classified as either micro- or macro-. For example, studies of community life, professional associations, and business corporations fall somewhere between these two levels of analysis. At least one prominent sociologist (Merton 1949) has suggested using the term "middle range" to describe the substantial quantity of sociological work that is not clearly either micro or macro.

THE SUBJECT MATTER OF SOCIOLOGY

In at least one important regard, today's beginning college or university student is set adrift in a bewildering intellectual supermarket. Courses seem to be offered on every academic (and sometimes not so academic) subject imaginable. Unfortunately, relatively little is said about how these many different courses and subjects relate. In a holistic sense, what is the larger message about the human condition that is to be learned from all this? Surely, a first text in sociology is not the place to address in depth such a complex question; but, it is important to locate sociology within the scheme of the human sciences. What is the place of sociology's subject matter in the modern social science curriculum?

Obviously, sociology's focus upon social behavior is shared with other social sciences, yet each of the other social sciences examines human behavior in specialized contexts. For example, economics is concerned with economic aspects of social life and with humans as economic actors. Political science studies political systems and humans as political actors. However, sociology focuses upon the patterns and processes of social relations in all spheres of social life, as well as the various interconnections among them. In other words, sociology claims to be the most general of the social science perspectives.

The precise aspects of the social landscape studied depend upon the sociologist's specific interests and areas of specialization. Because the expansion and proliferation of knowledge in today's technological society make it difficult to study systematically the entirety of complex phenomena, there are many sub-disciplines and specializations within sociology: among them are political sociology, family sociology, and urban sociology. Sociologists also specialize in the study of educational and religious institutions, deviance, and stratification, to name but a few. Many areas of interest and investigation necessarily overlap those of the other social sciences. However, in spite of this overlap, there are important differences among the various social sciences in their approaches to the subject matter. Each of the social sciences views social life with concepts central to its own discipline. Each looks at the world through a particular lens, focusing upon the subject matter in a distinctive way. The special features of sociology's particular lens is the concern of the rest of this chapter.

In summary, sociology is the scientific study and interpretation of social life. Sociologists focus upon individuals only to the extent that they participate in, and are shaped by, collective social patterns. Sociologists search in these collective patterns for explanations of human behavior. Macrosociology examines rather large, societal or even global questions. Microsociology focuses upon smaller units of social life, such as family relations and religious practices. Within this context, the things that sociologists study are exceedingly diverse. While sharing its focus on human behavior with the other social sciences, sociology brings a unique perspective to the study of social life, what might be called the art of doing sociology. The remaining sections of this chapter explore these themes in greater detail.

THE ART OF SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

What is involved in the art of sociological analysis? Typically, when people think about scientific activity, regardless of whether that science is physics or sociology, biology or psychology, a number of images are brought to mind. Science is said to be a method of study involving the collection of information or data, a rational process in which hypotheses are tested. The "facts" logically emerge from this rational process of comparing hypotheses and data. Surely, to some extent, each of these notions—that science is a method, that it is rational, and that it involves data collection and analysis—is a reasonable view of what science is and what scientists do.

However, these images of science tell only part of the story. Science is more than a rational application of certain methods and techniques. As Robert

Nisbet (1962) has suggested, the most important advances in science are produced, not through the use of sophisticated methodological tools, but rather through thought processes that characterize both art and science—creativity and discovery. They involve an ability to think about the subject matter in new and imaginative ways, a drive to understand and interpret, and a desire to communicate that understanding to others.

The art of sociological analysis involves a distinctive approach to the subject matter, what various writers have called the “sociological imagination.” It begins with a willingness to look beyond the obvious and take a fresh look at “taken-for-granted” familiar things. It revolves around a quest to discover and illuminate social reality. Peter Berger (1963) has described this as a “passion to understand.” While this chapter will explore the more rational features of sociology as a science, we begin here with the more creative elements of the sociological perspective.

Let’s examine the ideas of three sociologists, each of whom has attempted to capture the uniqueness of the sociological view of social reality. Each has explained, a bit differently, what is involved in the art of sociology. The 19th century French sociologist Emile Durkheim focused upon the process of discovering social facts and understanding the role of social forces in our lives. The late C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist of the 1950s and early 1960s, describes what he calls the “sociological imagination.” Mills demonstrates the importance of locating everyday events within a social-historical framework. Finally, a more contemporary sociologist, Peter L. Berger, suggests that sociology “unmasks” apparent social realities by looking beyond the obvious. Each of these three images provides a unique insight into the art of sociological analysis. Each offers clues about how one enters into the process of acquiring a uniquely sociological perspective.

DISCOVERING SOCIAL FACTS: EMILE DURKHEIM

The idea that sociology involves the discovery of “social facts” is a major contribution of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). In his book *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), Durkheim distinguishes between *individual facts* and *social facts*. *Individual facts are specific psychological and biological traits internal to individuals, while social facts are collective social forces that are external to individuals and exert control over them.* Social facts result from social participation. As people participate in social life, specific social forces emerge that become part of the larger culture and social structure which, in turn, influence individual behavior. Social facts are not simply the sum total of individual facts. Rather, social life constitutes a distinctive level of reality that is not interpretable in terms of the characteristics of individuals.

Let’s examine a concrete example of this. In a typical fast food restaurant a remarkably ordered set of activities unfolds. There is the appearance of a high level of coordination and commitment. As one person takes orders at the drive-up window, several other persons are cooking and packaging food to go. Other members of the work team are taking cash and making change, cleaning the work areas, and performing related tasks. Yet, this well-orchestrated collective activity does not result from the combined psychic activities of the individuals participating in it. In fact, Josh and Laurie, while busily cooking burgers

Individual facts

Social facts