STARTING SOCIOLOGY

FOURTH EDITION

JACK LEVIN / JAMES L. SPATES

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Fourth Edition

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Preface

A fourth edition is a happy and unnerving event. Happy because, obviously, authors are much gratified when colleagues think well enough of their work to keep using it after a decade and a half. Unnerving because those same authors are no longer the wide-eyed young sociologists fresh from graduate school they once were. The times have changed, sociology has changed, and, most importantly, *we* have changed.

Such reflections suggested to us that a thorough revision of *Starting Sociology* was called for. While keeping the basic format—a short, concepts-oriented text that can be used with other materials—in this edition we have updated examples, changed illustrations, and dealt with current debates. More significantly, we have reworked the text from *first to last page,* making the writing (we hope) more evocative and less redundant. The result is a more accessible style. Most introductory textbooks are long and ponderous, traits that have a deadening effect on students. We have changed the openings of most chapters so that they readily draw readers into the true subject matter of sociology—the lives of real people.

From Chapter 5 onward, we have made significant changes in examples and argumentation. Chapter 10, for example, has been retitled "The Problems and Promise of Sociology," and has been completely rewritten to reflect what we believe are the central issues facing the discipline and the questions students will encounter from skeptical others when their first semester of sociology is over. We have filled a significant gap in earlier editions by including a new chapter on deviance.

Taken together, these changes make the fourth edition of *Starting Sociology* a substantially new book, an edition true to the original concept that has

proved satisfactory to many, and yet reworked to reflect the current status of the field. We hope that new readers will be as pleased as we are with the result.

For quick reference we provide the following. This new edition of *Starting Sociology* has:

- Retained its original orientation as a concepts-oriented text that provides a brief introduction to the main concerns of the field and can be used with additional materials.
- Been stylistically reworked from first to last page.
- Been thoroughly updated with examples from the current literature and everyday life.
- Been substantially rewritten from Chapters 5 through 10 to reflect current thinking about sociology and the critical issues facing it; this is especially true of the last chapter, "The Problems and Promise of Sociology."
- Been revised to include a completely new chapter, "Deviance" (Chapter 7).

We would like to thank the reviewers who helped us in making this fourth edition; their comments and suggestions were extremely useful: Madeleine Adriance, Mount Ida College; James Treece, Liberty University; William Snizek, Virginia Polytechnic University; and Michael Kimmel, S.U.N.Y., Stony Brook.

Jack Levin
James L. Spates


DOUBLE DUTCH

Contents

Chapter 1

What Is Sociology?

THE SUBJECT MATTER OF SOCIOLOGY

It is winter near Tacoma, Washington. The well-educated wife of the suburban family, in her early thirties, is becoming disconsolate. Married for 8 years, she has two lovely children, all she ever wanted materially, and a husband who makes an excellent living. Yet something is missing. The endless routine of housework, clubs, entertaining, even vacationing, has begun to wear *very* thin. Her husband is deeply involved in his work, a computer business that also takes up an enormous amount of his free time. He doesn't seem to understand her complaints. Worse, her old solaces, the church and friends, don't seem to help. She doesn't know what to do.

While shopping one afternoon, her eye is caught by a poster advertising a discussion session to be held by a group of women in Tacoma. Taking a chance, she attends the next session. She learns that her discontent is not unique, that women throughout the country are finding their "expected pattern" of life restrictive. Attending a few more meetings, she becomes convinced that not only women, but men and children in America are locked into an unexamined regimen of life that, in the long run, is quite frustrating to what she has come to call "personal growth." Her husband, friends, and relatives are unimpressed with this new philosophy. Her frustration deepens and, some months later, with no change in attitude at home (and none on the horizon), she separates from her husband, gets a job in the city, works out a joint custody arrangement for the children, and becomes an active member of the city's women's movement.

The scene shifts to Detroit, halfway across the country; specifically, to a neighborhood in the northwest part of the city. It is nighttime. The streets are

full of people who are high on, and trying to get money for, crack, the latest drug scourge. Crack is a potent, impure, highly addictive, and relatively cheap form of cocaine. Some of the hustlers are men, clearly down and out, ragged and desperate looking. Others are teenage boys willing to do any errand for a few dollars to "buy the rock" (as crack is called). A few are welfare recipients attempting to sell their food stamps for much less than they are worth to get enough cash to feed not their stomachs but their raging habit. More than a few, sadly, are teenage girls selling themselves as prostitutes, often for as little as $12.00 a trick, so they, too, can smoke or snort or shoot the drug of their choice.

The police are not inattentive to all this illegal activity. They know that much of the crime in the area and a great proportion of the suffering they see around them are crack related. They try to bust the dealers, the suppliers, but it is hard business. They close up a few places where dealing takes place but, as soon as they do, it springs up again somewhere else. On this particular evening the cops have been quite effective. They have shut down a dealing operation in an abandoned house, broken all the windows so the cold of winter makes the place uninhabitable, and put an around-the-clock watch on the place. Rattled only for a moment, the crack dealers move on and, unbeknownst to the police, find another abandoned building a block or two away. There, from an upper-story window, they deal again. As a buyer approaches, furtively looking up and down the alley for the police, a dealer lowers a paper cup on a string. Money is placed in the cup, which is hoisted upwards. A second or two later, the cup descends again, a plastic bag of crack inside. Word spreads about the new location. In 15 minutes 20 more sales are made and the addicts disappear into the night to get high. A short half-hour of forgetfulness awaits them as the drug imparts its transient effects. As their withdrawal symptoms set in, the addicts will once again appear on the squalid streets and the cycle of fear and anger and desperation will begin once again (*Newsweek*, November 28, 1988).

Now the scene shifts back in time. It is almost two decades earlier: spring of 1971. American involvement in the war in Vietnam has escalated and a rash of student protests has shut down college classrooms across the country. At the small liberal arts college in upstate New York he attends, a disheveled-looking young man with long hair, a beard, and bright psychedelic clothes has been instrumental in organizing students against the war for the past 3 years. He is nationally known and by far the most radical member of his class. In May his class graduates. At the commencement ceremony, one of the young man's professors looks for him among the robed students, half expecting to find him along the sidelines, carrying a placard, protesting to the end or, also in protest against what he always called "meaningless middle-class ceremonies," boycotting the graduation altogether. To his amazement, the professor finds the young man smack in the middle of the graduating student group in front of the podium. He is almost unrecognizable. His hair is shorn, his beard gone, his eyes fixed attentively on the speaker, a member of the administration in Washington, D.C., that the student had so recently and vehemently opposed. Incredulous, the professor asks him after the ceremony what happened. The student responds that, first of all, his parents were there and would not appre-

ciate their son, the first in their family to graduate college, organizing a disruptive protest. Second, he has a job beginning Monday in the sports department of a large metropolitan newspaper and his rebellious attire and appearance would certainly not be apropos there. Third, he says, "Well . . . the sixties *are* over. We all have to grow up sometime!"

Three scenes. Three true-to-life cases, each strikingly different from the other: In one, the last described, an obviously nonmainstream individual, a "radical," suddenly, against all expectations, decides to become mainstream; in the second, a whole neighborhood and scores of lives are scarred by a drug epidemic; in the first, a person in one of our society's most traditional roles—that of the American housewife—gradually has her consciousness "raised" and forsakes that role for another. All these cases illustrate the subject matter of sociology and relate something about the breadth of the sociologist's interest in human affairs.

Before beginning their first course in sociology, most students have some vague idea about sociologists and the work they do. For instance, they might associate sociology with the "helping services" such as social work, community planning, or urban development. Or they might relate the discipline to the analysis of specific human problems such as the place of minority groups in America, the development of delinquent gangs, or the changing sexual patterns of college students.

And they would be right. Sociologists are involved in the examination of all these things and more. For example, sociologists would be extremely interested in all three scenes described earlier. A number of them have devoted their careers to studying the women's movement (see the discussion in Chapter 8), while others are concerned with understanding the prevalence and deleterious effects of drugs in our nation's cities (Chapter 7), and still others have analyzed the reasons for the rise and fall of the youth counterculture of the 1960s (Chapter 2). And this barely begins to exhaust the list. For instance, in addition to those topics just mentioned, sociologists study:

- The effect of religious beliefs on the life-style of different groups.
- The universal characteristics of human nature.
- The manner in which people use their hands while conversing with one another.
- The reason that many males in American society feel they must be a "success" in their life work.
- The reasons that many females in American society feel they must marry successful men.
- The current computer mania sweeping the country.
- The fact that three out of every four Americans live in urban areas.
- The reasons why many American farmers, after generations of making solid if not spectacular financial gains, are struggling merely to survive.

The central issue is this: Sociologists are interested in how social influences and social processes of *any* type shape human behavior. Why, for example, does a dedicated political radical "change his stripes" upon graduation from college? Why does a "woman with everything" throw it all over for a nontraditional life-style? Why do people in American society, in significant numbers,

"do drugs" when the evidence is overwhelming that continued usage frequently leads to personal and community disaster?

Finding the answers to such questions is not always easy. One reason for the difficulty is that human behavior is extremely complex and can be examined in many different ways. Consequently, a number of different approaches to its study have developed over the years, each claiming to make a unique contribution to our knowledge.

Economics and political science, for example, seek to understand the nature of human behavior in specialized contexts. Thus the field of economics focuses on forms of human behavior such as the operation of supply and demand, fluctuations in the business cycle, or the law of diminishing returns. Behavior beyond the scope of these economic exchanges is left to other fields to explore. In a similar way, political science investigates specifically political phenomena, such as the sources of power and control, international relations, voting behavior, and international conflict, leaving nonpolitical behavior to other analysts.

Sociology is much broader than economics and political science in its scope of inquiry. As Pitirim Sorokin (1947) once suggested, *the social elements of human behavior are present any time that two or more people encounter one another:*

> Sociology sees . . . generic social phenomena appearing in practically all social processes: economic, political, artistic, religious, philosophical. . . . The same is true of such social processes as competition and exploitation, domination and subordination, stratification and differentiation, solidarity and antagonism, and so forth. Each of these processes appears not only in single compartments of the [social order as a whole] but in practically all compartments of sociocultural life, and as such requires a [separate] study of its generic form[s]. . . . Such a study transcends the boundary lines of any compartmentalized discipline. (1947, p. 7)

The Perspective of Sociology

Despite its broad scope, **sociology** has a definite perspective: It is *the scientific study of the behavior of people when they interact with one another, and of the characteristics people develop as a result of such interaction.* Let us take a moment to say a few words about the key aspects of this definition: *social interaction* and *social characteristics.*

sociology The scientific study of the behavior of people when they interact with one another, and of the characteristics that people develop as a result of such interaction.

Social Interaction Sociology examines the behavior that results from encounters between as few as two people all the way to the behavior that results from encounters between nations. Some key questions that sociologists ask about the nature of social interaction are: How does interaction emerge and develop? What keeps it going? How does continued interaction affect the individuals involved? What must individuals do in order to maintain interaction? Under what conditions does interaction become unstable or change?

While at first blush these seem like abstract questions, they really can be made personal and concrete quite quickly. For example, consider the middle-class family, perhaps one not unlike your own or a family you know. All such families, if we look at them carefully, have a fairly typical *pattern* of interac-

tion. Fathers do this, mothers do that, the first brother acts one way, the second brother another, the sister yet another. How does this interaction keep going? Answer: People come to play "roles" (that is, they act consistently in similar situations) in families—the father's role, the sister's role—and, over time, come to expect consistent role behavior not only from themselves but from other members of the family (the second brother, for example, all other things being equal, does not suddenly assume the father's role on a given Friday night nor does the father assume his role). How does continued interaction affect the individuals involved? Answer: People are shaped by their role behavior. Fathers develop certain skills and attitudes; mothers, others; brothers and sisters, still others. What must individuals do in order to maintain interaction? Answer: (Basically) keep acting within the expected roles. Under what conditions does interaction become unstable or change? Answer: While many possibilities exist, people change when they come to see their role differently and begin acting differently as a result of their new understanding. Thus, the suburban housewife alluded to earlier, chaffing under the restrictions of her "homemaker" role, began a search for another, more meaningful role. Finding one, she began to perceive herself differently. She saw herself as a "modern woman," a person with complex interests that stretched far beyond familial duties. Her change in role behavior shifted the roles, expectations, and emotions of the entire family.

That said, however, it should be noted that sociologists use the word **social** in a special sense. As Peter Berger (1963, pp. 26–27) has put it, the use of the word must be "sharpened" for sociological purposes:

social The primary quality of human interaction. A social situation is one in which individuals orient their behavior toward one another.

> In common speech [the word "social"] may denote . . . a number of different things—the informal quality of a certain gathering ("this is a social meeting—let's not discuss business"), an altruistic attitude on somebody's part ("he had a strong social concern in his job"), or, more generally, anything derived from contact with other people ("a social disease"). The sociologist will use the term more narrowly and more precisely to refer to the quality of interaction, interrelationship, mutuality. Thus two men chatting on a street do not constitute a "society," but what transpires between them is certainly "social". . . . As to the exact definition of the word "social," it is difficult to improve on Max Weber's definition of a "social" situation as one in which people orient their actions towards one another. *The web of meanings, expectations and conduct resulting from such mutual orientation is the stuff of sociological analysis. [Our emphasis.]*

Social Characteristics The sociologist's concern with this "web of meanings, expectations, and conduct" is just what we mean when we say that the second main focus of sociology is on the characteristics that people develop as a result of social interaction. One thing is clear: When people take notice of one another (interact), their behavior is changed from what it was before they took notice. For example, two people walking casually down the street may suddenly recognize one another and immediately begin acting very differently: Their faces change, they stop, shake hands, and, fascinatingly, begin to speak in a prescribed and predictable manner. ("Hi. How are you?" "Fine. You?") In another social encounter, a British citizen shopping in the fabled Herrod's Department Store in London may suddenly meet the Queen of England out shopping with her retinue. Although this person's behavior also is likely to

change very suddenly, in this encounter the casual "greetings between friends" routine is not employed; another, much more formal, routine is used: The individual bows, lowers her eyes, calls the Queen "Your Majesty," and quickly passes out of her way. The Queen, for her part, is likely to smile rather formally, but otherwise take little interest.

The only way we can begin to explain these very different reactions in very *similar* social situations—two people meeting—is to recognize that, for different situations, different social characteristics have been developed and learned. Two friends have one set of such characteristics, the Queen and her subject another. Because of the widespread existence of such varied social characteristics, sociologists expend a great deal of effort trying to understand the different webs of meanings, expectations, and conduct that people have invented for different types of social interaction—for example, between residents of a small town, between men and women dating one another, or between upper-class people and their servants.

Indeed, the different social characteristics that individuals develop in interaction have led to whole subdivisions of sociology. For instance, one group of sociologists specializes in the study of human population characteristics and settlement patterns (human ecology) while others focus on the relatively permanent features of social life such as social class and people's beliefs (often called the study of social structure).

Most importantly, it is this interest in *all* types of social interaction and social characteristics that *distinguishes* sociology from other behavioral sciences. The economist is interested only in economic interaction and its attendant characteristics, the political scientist only in political interaction and its characteristics. Although some historians are interested in explaining many different social interactions and characteristics, they typically are interested in these only as they cast light on specific historical events—for example, the War of 1812—or specific historical trends—such as the rise of democracy in American society. In comparison to these disciplines, then, sociology is a *generalizing* discipline, ultimately trying to make statements about how *all* people will behave when they interact with one another, or about the essential social characteristics of *all* societies, *all* wars, or *all* families. The sociological enterprise, in other words, is hardly modest. Most sociologists believe that, in time, if they can but perfect their tools of analysis, their discipline has the ability to explain virtually everything of importance about human beings and their life together.

Sociology and Psychology

Since both psychology and sociology study general aspects of human behavior in everyday life, the essential difference between these fields of study may be particularly hard to see. Psychology and sociology study the same phenomena—human beings in social settings—but their focus on these phenomena is quite different.

According to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1957), the sociologist is primarily concerned with the relations *between* two or more people when they interact,

The difference between what sociologists and psychologists study is nicely summarized by these two examples of French art. Above is the well-known "Moulin de la Galette" by painter Auguste Renoir. Its subject matter is classically sociological: people interacting with one another in different ways in a social setting, in this case a street café. The dancers in the background, the people chatting in the lower right-hand portion of the painting are all acting *socially;* their behavior is of an *interactive* nature because they recognize the presence of others. On the right is sculptor Auguste Rodin's most famous piece, "The Thinker." It depicts a single person lost in thought. Psychologists take as their central focus of study just such a subject—the thoughts of a person and how they come to be ordered as they are.

while the psychologist is primarily concerned with the relations *within* one individual from one moment to the next. In other words, the sociologist is interested in the general principles that apply to *group process* and the psychologist is interested in the general principles that apply to the *mental process of an individual,* that is, those personal characteristics of behavior located within the individual, whether on a conscious or an unconscious level.

To put it differently, the sociologist takes the psychology of an individual for granted and is interested in the nature of one person's psychological makeup *only* when it influences the pattern of social interaction. Indeed, the sociologist would say that it is possible to have a perfectly adequate explanation of most human interactions without focusing on individual psychological traits at all! For example, teachers and students everywhere tend to interact within the purely social conventions of "how to transmit and acquire knowledge in a relatively formal setting," despite the fact that teacher and student may know next to nothing about each other's psychological characteristics. Consider a typical college lecture: The teacher comes in, stands at the front of the room, speaks for a given amount of time, takes questions, then leaves. Students, for their part, listen to the lecture, take notes, ask questions, and then leave. Note that all this interaction transpires in lecture class after lecture class, *all over the world,* without teachers and students *necessarily* knowing anything about each other's psychologies. This is the stuff of sociology.

The psychologist, on the other hand, takes the fact that all individuals live in society for granted and is interested in the nature of a particular social convention *only* when it changes how the person being examined thinks; for example, how a specific teacher was very influential in Mary Jones's life. The distinction between the sociological and psychological perspectives is depicted in Figure 1-1.

Another way to think of it is this: Sociology does not explain everything of relevance about human behavior, but it does study something not adequately investigated by any other discipline. As one of the principal founders of the discipline, Emile Durkheim (1964, p. 3), argued, "What is social about human behavior is . . . a category of facts with very distinctive characteristics; [they] consist of ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and [are] endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him."

In fact, the influence of what Durkheim calls "social facts" is so great that they even *condition* much of our individual psychology. In Box 1-1, there is an example of a person going to school and learning geometry. Clearly, how this individual's thoughts develop as a result of this process is a psychological problem, but the very fact that the person desired to learn geometry at all, knew that school was the place to learn it, and learned it in a certain way are all internal thoughts that have been *strongly conditioned by the society* in which the individual lives. Similarly, our thoughts about how to organize our day—from waking to sleeping—are all shaped by our knowledge of social life (we wear certain types of clothing, are at certain places at certain times, think about how to present an argument to another person, and so on).

Obviously, if these social facts are so influential in our lives, they are worthy of careful study. It is with this in mind that we now turn to a consideration of how sociologists practice their trade.