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Jay Gabler, PhD

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Sociology FOR **DUMMIES®**

by Jay Gabler, PhD



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Sociology
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About the Author

Jay Gabler is a writer, editor, and college teacher living in Minneapolis. He holds a bachelor's degree from Boston University and graduate degrees, including a Ph.D. in sociology, from Harvard University. With colleagues, he has published multiple sociological research studies including the book *Reconstructing the University* (with David John Frank, Stanford University Press, 2006). He currently teaches sociology, psychology, and education at Rasmussen College. He is also associate editor of the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, where he writes regularly on the arts, and author of the most recent edition of the *Insiders' Guide to the Twin Cities* (Globe Pequot Press, 2010).

Dedication

To David John Frank and Jason Kaufman, my mentors in sociology.

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I owe gratitude to Susan Hobbs and Erin Calligan Mooney, my editors at Wiley, for everything they've done to make this book a reality. Jennifer Connolly also contributed significantly to the first chapters of this book, with helpful editing and suggestions.

My professional training in sociology took place over the course of a decade at Harvard University; every page in this book benefits indirectly from the insights and expertise of my then-colleagues in the Department of Sociology. My Harvard classmate Felix Elwert was instrumental in suggesting that I write this book and connecting me with the publisher. My current colleagues at Rasmussen College have also been supportive, as have my coworkers at the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*. Much of this book was written at the Macalester College library, and I am grateful to that institution for sharing its resources.

This book is informed by a range of sources, three of which were particularly useful. Randall Collins's *Sociological Insight*, as I mention frequently in the text of this book, was my personal introduction to sociology, and it continues to underlie my perspective on the discipline. I recommend that book in Chapter 17. A book that I would not recommend to beginners but would strongly recommend to readers interested in really sinking their teeth into sociological theory is Peter Knapp's *One World – Many Worlds: Contemporary Sociological Theory*, which particularly informed Chapter 3 of this book. *Essentials of Sociology*, by David B. Brinkerhoff, Lynn K. White, Suzanne T. Ortega, and Rose Weitz, is the text I teach from at Rasmussen and was also helpful as I wrote this book.

Throughout my life I've enjoyed the enthusiastic support of a loving family, both immediate and extended. In particular, my parents, Jim and Jean Gabler, have in every way supported my academic achievements and adventures. As I wrote this book, many friends — in particular, Anna Meyer — helped sustain me with caring encouragement every day. It meant a lot to me.

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Introduction

Welcome to sociology! I've written this book to introduce you to one of the biggest and most fascinating disciplines in all of science. Yes, you read that right: Sociology is a science. Sociologists don't use beakers and test tubes, but like natural scientists, they do seek to learn about the world by creating theories and testing them with systematic observations.

What makes sociology both so interesting and so challenging is its subject: the social world. Society is huge, and hugely complex: there are answers to sociological questions, but there usually aren't any *easy* answers. In addition to the challenge of answering sociological questions, there's the challenge of *asking* them — that is, of thinking about society as a subject of objective, scientific study. Your grandpa and your minister and the guy who works at your local coffee shop probably don't have any opinions about how atoms should and shouldn't bond with one another, but they certainly all have opinions about how society should be organized. Studying society scientifically means setting aside — temporarily — your thoughts about how society *should* work.

After you do that, though, you can learn some amazing things about the world. The achievements of sociologists are among the great achievements of the human race because in sociology, people from all different walks of life come together to understand society objectively — so that, in the long run, it can perhaps be made to work better for everyone. However you've come to sociology, I hope this book leaves you with a greater respect not just for sociologists wearing lab coats (yes, some of them actually do) but for your entire species, the first species on Earth capable of conscious self-analysis. What sociologists see when they look at society isn't always pretty, but that fact makes sociology all the more important: Just like you need to know how a car works before you can fix it, you need to understand how society works before you can change it.

About This Book

I've written this book to introduce you to sociology as a body of knowledge about society, but much more importantly to introduce you to sociology as a *way of thinking about the world*.