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Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Understand the sociological point of view and how it differs from that of journalists and talk-show hosts.
- Compare and contrast sociology with the other major social sciences.
- Describe the early development of sociology from its origins in nineteenth-century Europe.

- Know the contributions of sociology's pioneers: Comte, Martineau, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber.
- Describe the early development of sociology in the United States.
- Understand the functionalist, conflict theory, and the interactionist perspectives.
- Realize the relationship between theory and practice.

T

The sweet, smiling faces of America's missing children are on fliers and billboards. Their disappearance launches Amber Alerts and search parties of neighbors and law officials. And newscasters like Katie Couric, of the *Today Show*, eagerly jump into the fray, leading the hour with the latest abduction story and advocating for mandatory education for children in how to avoid being kidnapped. The problem, she warned in one broadcast, was at epidemic levels—58,000 American children annually snatched by strangers.

Over at Fox News, Bill O'Reilly added to the frenzy with even more alarming numbers. Calling the latest incident "the tip of the iceberg," he insisted that there were "more than 100,000 abductions of children by strangers every year in the United States" (VitalStats, 2002).

Numbers like these, cited in congressional testimony, are what eventually led to legislation designed to facilitate recovery of missing kids, in part by centralizing the reporting and tracking of children.

Parents, naturally, are worried sick. Many eagerly trot their youngsters off to places like Wal-Mart or Home Depot or Blockbuster to be documented in case police someday need identifying information. A study of parents' worries by the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, found that nearly three-quarters of parents said they feared their child being abducted.

It's a horrific, national problem.

Or is it?

Losing even one child to a kidnapper is, of course, a tragedy. But the chances of that happening are far less than what news reports would have us believe.

According to a Justice Department study, only about 115 cases annually now qualify as "stereotypical kidnappings," in which a child is taken by a stranger and either held for ransom, abused, or killed. About 43% of the kids in the *Today Show*'s tally were missing for less than an hour, and many of the ones who did disappear know the folks who took them. Indeed, most abductions are related to child custody suits.

In addition, many of the children who are kidnapped by "nonfamily" members are taken by friends, romantic partners, or acquaintances. And a large number of the "missing children" are actually teenagers, particularly teenage girls who run off with their boyfriends.

With 50 million children under the age of 13 in the United States, the actual chance of having a child abducted and murdered is about 1 in 450,000 (Hammer et al., 2002; Cooper, 2005).

Despite the varying reasons for child abduction, no one is denying that the issue is a legitimate social problem with very serious consequences. Is this

sociology? Or, for that matter, is this what sociologists do when they study society? The answer would have to be no.

The *New York Times*, at the top of every issue, has the statement “all the news that’s fit to print.” If this statement were true, each issue would be so large that few would attempt to read it. News is brought to us by people who make choices. Some of their choices, inevitably, are better than others and represent the perceptions of the reporters and editors who produce the papers or news broadcasts (Murray, Schwartz, & Lichten, 2001).

Far too infrequently do we realize that people often use data to persuade and that statistics can be used as part of a strategy to promote concern about a social problem. Much of the information we read every day and mistake for sociology is actually an attempt by one group or another to influence social policy. Other information mistaken for sociology is really an attempt to sell a book, or the efforts of television producers to present entertaining programs.

With the constant bombardment of information about social issues, we could come to believe that nearly everyone is engaged in the study of sociology to some extent and that everyone has not only the right but also the ability to put forth valid information about society. This is not the case. Some people have no interest in putting forth objective information and are instead interested in getting us to support their position or point of view. On other occasions the “researchers” do not have the ability or training to disseminate accurate information about drug abuse, homelessness, welfare, high school dropout rates, white-collar crime, or a host of other sociological topics.

Sociologists have very different goals in mind when they investigate a problem than do journalists or talk-show hosts. A television talk-show host needs to make the program entertaining and maintain high ratings, or the show may be canceled. A journalist is writing for a specific readership. This will certainly limit the choice of topics, as well as the manner in which an issue is investigated. On the other hand, a sociologist must answer to the scientific community as she or he tries to further our understanding of a topic. This means that the goal is not high ratings, but an accurate and scientific approach to the issue being studied.

In this book we will ask you to go beyond popular sociology and investigate society more scientifically than you did before. You will learn to look at major events, as well as everyday occurrences, a little differently and start to notice patterns you may have never seen before. After you are equipped with the tools of research, you should be able to evaluate critically popular presentations of sociology. You will see that sociology represents both a body of knowledge and a scientific approach to the study of social issues.



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Vast differences exist within the same society.

Sociology as a Point of View

Sociology is the scientific study of human society and social interactions. As sociologists our main goal is to understand social situations and look for repeating patterns in society. We do not use facts selectively to create a lively talk show, sell newspapers, or support one particular point of view. Instead, sociologists are engaged in a rigorous scientific endeavor, which requires objectivity and detachment.

The main focus of sociology is the group, not the individual. Sociologists attempt to understand the forces that operate throughout society—forces that mold individuals, shape their behavior, and thus determine social events.

When you walk into an introductory physics class, you may know very little about the subject and hold very few opinions about the various topics within the field. On the other hand, when you enter your introductory sociology class for the first time, you will feel quite familiar with the subject matter. You have the advantage of coming to sociology with a substantial amount of information, which you have gained simply by being a member of society. Ironically, this knowledge also can leave you at a disadvantage,

Figure I–1 Levels of Social Understanding: Domestic Violence

because these views have not been gathered in a scientific fashion and may not be accurate.

Over the years and through a variety of experiences we develop a set of ideas about the world and how it operates. This point of view influences how we look at the world and guides our attempts to understand the actions and reactions of others. Even though we accept the premise that individuals are unique, we tend to categorize or even stereotype people to interpret and predict behavior and events.

Is this personalized approach adequate for bringing about an understanding of ourselves and society? Although it may serve us quite well in our day-to-day lives, a sociologist would answer that it does not give us enough accurate information to develop an understanding of the broader social picture. This picture becomes clear only when we know something about the society in which we live, the social processes that affect us, and the patterns of interaction that characterize our lives.

Let us take the issue of domestic violence. Figure 1–1 shows that we could examine the issue in a variety of ways. If we knew a woman who was the victim of domestic violence, we would have personal information about the experience. If she were willing to discuss her experience with us, we would know more about domestic violence on a specific case level. Although this information is important, it is not yet sociology and is closer to the personalized common-sense approach to understanding society. Sociology tries to move beyond that level of understanding.

If we rely on our own experiences, we are like the blind men of Hindu legend trying to describe an elephant: the first man, feeling its trunk, asserts, “It is like a snake”; the second, trying to reach around the beast’s leg, argues, “No, it is like a tree”; and the third, feeling its solid side, disagrees, saying, “It is more like a wall.” In a small way, each man is right, but not one of them is able to understand or describe the whole elephant.

If we were to look for recurring patterns in domestic violence, we would now be doing what sociologists do. A sociologist examining the issue might

be interested in the age, socioeconomic level, and ethnic characteristics of the victims of domestic violence. A sociologist might want to compare these characteristics with the characteristics of victims of other types of violence: “Are there differences?” he or she asks. “If so, what kinds and why?”

While studying sociology, you will be asked to look at the world a little differently from the way you usually do. Because you will be looking at the world through other people’s eyes—using new points of view—you will start to notice things you may never have noticed before. When you look at life in a middle-class suburb, for instance, what do you see? How does your view differ from that of a poor inner-city resident? How does the suburb appear to a recent immigrant from Russia or Cuba or India? How does it appear to a burglar? Finally, what does the sociologist see?

Sociology asks you to broaden your perspective on the world. You will start to see that the reason people act in markedly different ways is not because one person is “sane” and another is “crazy.” Rather, it is because they all have different ways of making sense out of what is going on in the world around them.

These unique perceptions of reality produce varying lifestyles, which in turn produce different perceptions of reality. To understand other people, we must stop looking at the world from a perspective based solely on our own individual experiences.

The Sociological Imagination

Although most people interpret social events on the basis of their individual experiences, sociologists step back and view society more as an outsider than as a personally involved and possibly biased participant. For example, whereas we assume that most people in the United States marry because of love, sociologists remind us that the decision to marry—or not to marry—is influenced by a variety of social values taught to us since early childhood.

That is, we select our mates based on the social values we internalize from family, peers, neighbors,

community leaders, and even our television heroes. As a result, we are less likely to marry someone from a different socioeconomic class, from a different race or religion, or from a markedly different educational background. Thus, as we pair off, we follow somewhat predictable patterns: In most cases the man is older, earns more money, and has a higher occupational status than the woman.

These patterns may not be evident to the two people who are in love with each other; indeed, they may not be aware that anything other than romance played a role in their choice of a mate. As sociologists we begin to discern marriage patterns.

We may note that marriage rates vary in different parts of the country, that the average age of marriage is related to educational level, and that social class is related to marital stability. These patterns (discussed in Chapter 12) show us that there are forces at work that influence marriage and that may not be evident to the individuals who fall in love and marry.

C. Wright Mills (1959) pointed out different levels on which social events can be perceived and interpreted. He used the term the **sociological imagination** to refer to *this relationship between individual experiences and forces in the larger society that shape our actions*.

The sociological imagination is the process of looking at all types of human behavior patterns and discerning previously unseen connections among them, noting similarities in the actions of individuals with no direct knowledge of one another, and finding subtle forces that mold people's actions. Like a museum-goer who draws back from a painting to see how the separate strokes and colors form subtly shaded images, sociologists stand back from individual events to see why and how they occurred. In so doing, they discover patterns that govern our social existence.

The sociological imagination focuses on every aspect of society and every relationship among individuals. It studies the behavior of crowds at ball games and racetracks; shifts in styles of dress and popular music; changing patterns of courtship and marriage; the emergence and fading of different lifestyles, political movements, and religious sects; the distribution of income and access to resources and services; decisions made by the Supreme Court, by congressional committees, and by local zoning boards; and so on. Every detail of social existence is food for sociological thought and relevant to sociological analysis.

The potential for sociology to be put to use—applied to the solution of real-world problems—is enormous. Proponents of applied sociology believe the work of sociologists can and should be used to help bring about an understanding of, and perhaps even guidelines for changing, the complexities of modern society.

The demand for applied sociology is growing, and many sociologists work directly with government agencies or private businesses in an effort to apply sociological knowledge to real-world problems.

For example, they might investigate such questions as how the building of a dam will affect the residents of the area, how jury makeup affects the outcome of a case, why voters select one candidate over another, how a company can boost employee morale, and how relationships among administrators, doctors, nurses, and patients affect hospital care. The answers to these questions have practical applications. The growing demand for sociological information provides many new career choices for sociologists (see “*For Further Thinking: If You Are Thinking about Sociology as a Career, Read This*”).

Is Sociology Common Sense?

Common sense is what people develop through everyday life experiences. In a very real sense, it is the set of expectations about society and people's behavior that guides our own behavior. Unfortunately, these expectations are not always reliable or accurate because without further investigation, we tend to believe what we want to believe, to see what we want to see, and to accept as fact whatever appears to be logical. Whereas common sense is often vague, oversimplified, and frequently contradictory, sociology as a science attempts to be specific, to qualify its statements, and to prove its assertions.

Upon closer inspection, we find that the proverbial words of wisdom rooted in common sense are often illogical. Why, for example, should you “look before you leap” if “he who hesitates is lost”? How can “absence make the heart grow fonder” when “out of sight, out of mind”? Why should “opposites attract” when “birds of a feather flock together”? The “common sense” approach to sociology is one of the major dangers the new student encounters. Common sense often makes sense after the fact. It is more useful for describing events than for predicting them. It deludes us into thinking we knew the outcome all along (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990).

One researcher (Teigen, 1986) asked students to evaluate actual proverbs and their opposites. When given the actual proverb “Fear is stronger than love,” most students agreed that it was true. But so did students who were given the reverse statement, “Love is stronger than fear.” The same was true for the statements “Wise men make proverbs and fools repeat them” (actual proverb) and its reversal, “Fools make proverbs and wise men repeat them.”

Although common sense gleaned from personal experience may help us in certain types of interactions, it will not help us understand why and under what conditions these interactions are taking place.

FOR FURTHER THINKING

If You Are Thinking about Sociology as a Career, Read This



Speaking from this side of the career-decision hurdle, I can say that being a sociologist has opened many doors for me. It gave me the credentials to teach at the college level and to become an author of a widely used sociology text. It also enabled me to be a newspaper columnist and a talk-show host. Would I recommend this field to anyone else? I would, but not blindly. Realize before you begin that sociology can be an extremely demanding discipline and, at times, an extremely frustrating one.

As in many other fields, the competition for jobs in sociology can be fierce. If you really want this work, do not let the herd stop you. Anyone with motivation, talent, and a determined approach to finding a job will do well. However, be prepared for the long haul: To get ahead in many areas you will need to spend more than four years in college. Consider your bachelor's degree as just the beginning.

Fields like teaching at the college level and advanced research often require a PhD, which means at least four to six years of school beyond the BA.

Now for the job possibilities. As you read through these careers, remember that right now your exposure to sociology is limited (you are only on Chapter 1 in your first college sociology text), so do not eliminate any possibilities right at the start. Spend some time thinking about each one as the semester progresses and you learn more about this fascinating discipline.

Most people who go into sociology become teachers. You will need a PhD to teach in college, but often a master's degree will open the door for you at the two-year college or high school level.

Second in popularity to teaching are nonacademic research jobs in government agencies, private research institutions, and the research departments of private corporations. Researchers carry on many different functions, including conducting market research, public opinion surveys, and impact assessments. Evaluation research, as the latter field is known, has become more popular in recent years because the federal government now requires environmental impact studies on all large-scale federal projects. For example, before a new interstate highway is built, evaluation researchers attempt to determine the effect the highway will have on communities along the proposed route.

This is only one of many opportunities available in government work. Federal, state, and local governments in policy-making and administrative functions also hire sociologists. For example, a sociologist

employed by a community hospital provides needed data on the population groups being served and on the health care needs of the community. Another example: Sociologists working in a prison system can devise plans to deal with the social problems that are inevitable when people are put behind bars. Here are a few additional opportunities in government work: community planner, correction officer, environmental analyst, equal opportunity specialist, probation officer, rehabilitation counselor, resident director, and social worker.

A growing number of opportunities also exist in corporate America, including market researchers, pollsters, human resource managers, affirmative action coordinators, employee assistance program counselors, labor relations specialists, and public information officers, just to name a few. These jobs are available in nearly every field from advertising to banking, from insurance to publishing.

Although your corporate title will not be "sociologist," your educational background will give you the tools you need to do the job—and do it well, which, to corporations, is the bottom line.

Whether you choose government or corporate work, you will have the best chance of finding the job you want by specializing in a particular field of sociology while you are still in school. You can become an urban or family specialist or become knowledgeable in organizational behavior before you enter the job market. For example, many demographers, who compile and analyze population data, have specialized in this aspect of sociology. Similarly, human ecologists, who investigate the structure and organization of a community in relation to its environment, have specialized educational backgrounds as well. Keep in mind that many positions require a minor or some course work in other fields such as political science, psychology, ecology, law, or business. By combining sociology with these fields, you will be well prepared for the job market.

What next? Be optimistic and start planning. As the American Sociological Association observed, few fields are as relevant to today and as broadly based as sociology. Yet, ironically, its career potential is just beginning to be tapped. Start planning by reading the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, as well as academic journals to keep abreast of career trends. Then study hard and choose your specialty. With this preparation, when the time comes to find a job, you will be well prepared.

SOCIAL CHANGE



Too Smart to Marry?

Many of the subjects that we study in sociology are also popular topics in the media, or concepts that people think of as “common sense.” Take the idea that the more education a woman has, the less likely she is to marry. Any brainy girl who has ever heard the taunt, “It’s not smart to be too smart,” is likely to wonder if a high GPA will sink her chances of ever finding wedded bliss. Stereotypes like these are often given additional credence in the press. Take a piece written by Maureen Dowd, a columnist for the *New York Times*. She wrote, “The rule of thumb seems to be that the more successful the woman, the less likely it is that she will find a husband or bear a child. For men the reverse is true.” Most of the letters in response to her column agreed.

As with many stereotypes like this, there is often some nugget of truth behind such thinking. But here is the crucial difference between sociology and popular wisdom: As sociologists we do not automatically accept such easy pronouncements as fact. Like scientists—and sociology is, after all, a social *science*—we want proof, and we cultivate a healthy degree of skepticism until we get it. In a case like this, we would look at research data to determine whether these views are really true. Were they accurate at a certain point in time but not at another? Do they describe certain women and not others?

A review of marriage data for the past few decades would show us that although the stereotype once was true, in the past 25 years, the marriage gap between more and less educated women has narrowed significantly. In 1980, a woman who did not have a high school degree was more likely to be married than a

woman with a college or graduate degree. Today the reverse is true. College-educated women are now more likely to be married than high school dropouts.

The profile of men most likely to marry has also changed. Today, the person most likely to end up without a wedding ring is the poorly educated man. The real truth now? Smart is sexy—for both sexes.

Education	1980	1990	2000
11th Grade	85.6	75.2	65.0
College	86.2	81.0	78.2
Grad School	85.1	84.5	82.5

Education	1980	1990	2000
11th Grade	83.9	77.5	70.1
College	83.4	77.7	76.8
Grad School	66.0	71.3	73.8

United States Census of Population, Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) 5% sample.

Sources: Rose, Elaina. (2004, March). Education and Hypergamy in Marriage Markets; Department of Economics, Paper #353330. Seattle: University of Washington; Dowd, Maureen. (2002, April 10). “The Baby Bust.” *New York Times*.

Sociologists as scientists attempt to qualify these statements by specifying, for example, under what conditions do “opposites tend to attract” or “birds of a feather flock together.” Sociology as a science is oriented toward gaining knowledge about why and under what conditions events take place in order to understand human interactions better. (For a discussion of how sociology is different from common sense see “Social Change: Too Smart to Marry?”)

Sociology and Science

Sociology is commonly described as one of the social sciences. Science refers to *a body of systematically arranged knowledge that shows the operation of general laws*.

Sociology also uses the same general methods of investigation that are used in the natural sciences. Like the natural scientists, sociologists use the **scientific method**, *a process by which a body of scientific knowledge is built through observation, experimentation, generalization, and verification*.

The collection of data is an important aspect of the scientific method, but facts alone do not constitute a science. To have any meaning, facts must be ordered in some way, analyzed, generalized, and related to other facts. This is known as theory construction. Theories help organize and interpret facts and relate them to previous findings of other researchers.

Science is only one of the ways in which human beings study the world around them. Take feeling happy as an example. A physiologist might describe joy as



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Sociologists and anthropologists share many theories and concepts. Whereas sociologists tend to study groups and institutions within large, modern, industrial societies, anthropologists tend to focus on the cultures of small, preindustrial societies.

a biochemical response to certain events. A poet might describe the experience in beautiful language. A theologian might describe happiness as the outcome of a relationship with God.

Unlike other means of inquiry, science for the most part limits its investigations to empirical entities, things that can be observed directly or that produce directly observable events. Therefore, one of the basic features of science is **empiricism**, *the view that generalizations are valid only if they rely on evidence that can be observed directly or verified through our senses*. For example, theologians might discuss the role of faith in producing “true happiness”; philosophers might deliberate over what happiness actually encompasses; but sociologists would note, analyze, and predict the consequences of such measurable items as job satisfaction, the relationship between income and education, and the role of social class in the incidence of divorce.

Sociology as a Social Science

The social sciences consist of all *those disciplines that apply scientific methods to the study of human behavior*. Although there is some overlap, each of the social sciences has its own area of investigation. It is helpful to understand each of the social sciences and to examine sociology’s relationship to them.

Cultural Anthropology The social science most closely related to sociology is *cultural anthropology*. The two have many theories and concepts in common and often overlap. The main difference is in the groups they study and the research methods they use. Sociologists tend to study groups and institutions within large, modern, industrial societies, using research methods that enable them rather quickly to gather specific information about large numbers of people. In contrast, cultural anthropologists often immerse themselves in another society for a long time, trying to learn as much as possible about that society and the relationships among its people. Thus, anthropologists tend to focus on the culture of small, preindustrial societies because they are less complex and more manageable using this method of study.

Psychology The study of individual behavior and mental processes is part of *psychology*; the field is concerned with such issues as motivation, perception, cognition, creativity, mental disorders, and personality. More than any other social science, psychology uses laboratory experiments.

Psychology and sociology overlap in a subdivision of each field known as *social psychology*—the study of how human behavior is influenced and shaped by various social situations. Social psychologists study