

CHAPTER 1: THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

BRIEF CHAPTER OUTLINE

- I. What Is Sociology?
- II. The Sociological Perspective
 - A. Discovering Unsettling Facts
 - B. Debunking in Sociology
 - C. Establishing Critical Distance
- III. The Significance of Diversity
 - A. Defining Diversity
 - B. Society in Global Perspective
- IV. The Development of Sociological Theory
 - A. The Influence of the Enlightenment
 - B. Classical Sociological Theory
 - C. Sociology in the United States
- V. Theoretical Frameworks in Sociology
 - A. Functionalism
 - B. Conflict Theory
 - C. Symbolic Interaction
 - D. Feminist Theory
- VI. Chapter Summary

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1. Illustrate what is meant by saying that human behavior is shaped by social structure.
- 2. Question individualistic explanations of human behavior.
- 3. Describe the significance of studying diversity in contemporary society.
- 4. Explain the origins of sociological thought.
- 5. Compare and contrast the major frameworks of sociological theory.

KEY TERMS (listed in text):

conflict theory (21)
debunking (9)
diversity (13)
empirical (7)
Enlightenment (14)
feminist theory (22)
functionalism (20)
issues (7)
positivism (15)
social change (5)

social facts (15)
social institution (5)
social interaction (5)
social structure (7)
sociological imagination (6)
sociology (4)
symbolic interaction theory (21)
troubles (7)
verstehen (17)

KEY PEOPLE

Jane Addams (18)
Auguste Comte (15)
Alexis de Tocqueville (15)
W. E. B. DuBois (18)
Emile Durkheim (15)
Harriett Martineau (15)
Karl Marx (16)

Robert Merton (20)
C. Wright Mills (6)
Robert Park (17)
Talcott Parsons (20)
Georg Simmel (11)
Max Weber (17)
Ida B. Wells-Barnett (18)

LECTURE OUTLINE

I. What Is Sociology?

1. **Sociology** is the study of human behavior in society.
 - a. Sociologists view all human behavior as occurring in the context of the social institutions and culture of society.
 - b. It is a scientific way of thinking about society and its influence on human groups.

II. It is useful to see human behavior in societal context, because it reveals the underlying basis for many social issues, problems, and current events. **The Sociological Perspective**

1. Sociological inquiry emerges from the **sociological imagination**—the ability to see the societal patterns that influence individual and group life. A fundamental concept for organizing the sociological imagination is the distinction between:
 - a. **troubles** (privately felt problems that spring from events or feelings in one individual's life) and
 - b. **issues** (that affect large numbers of people and have their origins in the institutional arrangements and history of a society).
2. The task of sociology, according to C. Wright Mills, is to employ the *sociological perspective* to understand how issues are shaped by **social structure** (the organized pattern of social relationships and social institutions that together constitute society).
 - A. **Discovering Unsettling Facts** - Acquiring a sociological perspective can be unsettling because it exposes *problems that are deeply embedded in society*, but it can also illuminate the fun and odd aspects of everyday life.
 - B. **Debunking in Sociology** - Sociological thinking uses the process of **debunking** to question actions and ideas that are usually taken-for-granted. Sociologists look behind the facades of everyday life to “unmask” the patterns and processes that shape observed social behavior.
 - C. **Establishing Critical Distance** - Debunking requires critical distance—that is, being able to detach from the situation at hand and view things with a critical mind.

III. The Significance of Diversity

A. Defining Diversity

1. **Diversity** refers to the variety of group experiences that result from the social structure of society.

2. Diversity lies at the heart of many difficult social problems, but it is also a source of great cultural richness and human achievement.
 3. Inequalities created by race, class, gender, and other social categories have produced victims of social injustice as well as a long record of achievement.
- B. Society in Global Perspective** - Understanding diversity in the United States in many respects means seeing things—from unemployment to the toys children play with—from a global perspective.

IV. The Development of Sociological Theory

- A. The Influence of The Enlightenment** - The **Enlightenment** was characterized by faith in the ability of human reason to solve society's problems.
1. **Auguste Comte** first coined the term “sociology” as the scientific study of society based on **positivism**.
 2. **Alexis de Tocqueville**, a French citizen, analyzed U.S. democratic culture and society in *Democracy in America*.
 3. The British **Harriet Martineau** analyzed American social customs in *Society in America* and wrote one of the first sociologist methods books on the research method called participant observation (*How to Observe Manners and Morals*).
- B. Classical Sociological Theory** - The giants of the European traditions were Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber.
1. **Emile Durkheim** viewed society as an entity larger than the sum of its parts (society *sui generis*). His work focused on how public rituals and belief systems created *social solidarity* and on how a social system could be known through the discovery and analysis of **social facts**—those social patterns that are external to individuals.
 2. **Karl Marx** considered society to be shaped by economic forces and analyzed capitalism as a system of class relationships.
 3. **Max Weber** developed a *multidimensional* analysis of society, integrating political, economic, and cultural dimensions. He developed the concept of **Verstehen** as a method for understanding social behavior from the point of view of those engaged in it. He defined *social action* as a behavior to which people give meaning.
- C. Sociology in the United States** - American sociology built on the European tradition, but added unique features of U.S. culture.
1. Less theoretical and more practical than European sociologists.
 2. The use of the **organic metaphor** to understand society.
 3. Sociologists of the Chicago School were interested in how society shaped the mind and identity of people, and they used social settings as human laboratories in which sociologists could do scientific studies that would address human needs.
 4. **Robert Park** focused on the sociological design of cities, including the influence of race and class.
 5. **Jane Addams**, a leader in the settlement house movement and the only practicing sociologist to win the Nobel Peace Prize, used her skills as a research sociologist to develop community projects that assisted people in need.
 6. **Ida B. Wells-Barnett** (1862-1931) was another early sociologist, widely noted for her work in the anti-lynching movement. Born a slave, Ida B. Wells learned to read and write at Rust College, a school established for freed slaves, later

receiving her teaching credentials at Fisk University. She wrote numerous essays on the status of African Americans in the United States and was an active crusader against lynching and for women's rights, including the right to vote.

7. **W. E. B. DuBois**, the first black scholar to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard was a prominent Black scholar and co-founder of the NAACP. He devoted his life work to addressing the racial divisiveness in U.S. society.

V. **Theoretical Frameworks in Sociology**

1. Social theory is a tool that sociologists use to organize their empirical observations, to produce logically related statements about observed behavior, and to relate observed social facts to broad sociological questions.
 - a. Theoretical frameworks that strive to understand society as a whole are called *macrosociology*.
 - b. Theoretical frameworks that center on everyday face-to-face interactions are known as *microsociology*.
- A. Functionalism** interprets each part of society in terms of how it contributes to the stability of the whole.
 1. The functionalist framework emphasizes consensus and order, and views disorganization in the system, or dysfunction, as the impetus for change.
 2. Leading functionalist theorists are **Talcott Parsons** and **Robert Merton**, who developed the idea of *manifest* and *latent functions* of human behavior.
 3. Critics of functionalism argue that its emphasis on social stability is inherently conservative and that it understates the roles of power and conflict in society.
- B. Conflict Theory** emphasizes the role of coercion and power in producing social order. Conflict theory focuses on the grounds of struggle in society—particularly inequalities based on class, race, and gender.
 1. Conflict theory has been criticized for neglecting the importance of shared values and public consensus in society while overemphasizing inequality.
- C. Symbolic Interaction** considers immediate social interaction to be the place where “society” exists. It considers society to be socially constructed through constant negotiation and human interpretation.
- D. Feminist Theory** provides new ways of seeing the world and contributes to a more complete view of society by focusing on the experiences of women.

LECTURE/DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

1. **Social Location.** Conduct a survey of the class to determine the key factors that define the students' social locations. This could be done by having students list socially defining characteristics under categories on a blackboard or flip-chart stations around the classroom, or through small group discussions in which each group produces a list of important social characteristics of group members. Based on the compiled social locations, lead a discussion about the consequences of social locations in society, about how they might influence the way the students view social issues, and about what social locations are missing from the class. This interactive lecture could be followed by an in-class activity (see next section).
2. **Debunking.** Conduct a true-false questionnaire on common social myths and then lead a discussion on how sociological research has examined and explained those social issues. The “debunking” exercise could also be conducted as an online discussion. Open the discussion

with a social myth about an easily researched topic like teen pregnancy, welfare mothers, or youth violence. Suggest websites and other resources from which students can find research on the topic. The discussion can include contributions from students on research issues that need to be considered, as well as research findings confirming or discrediting the social myth.

3. **Cultural Diversity.** As a class discussion, show students the information regarding differences in cultural norms from the following website:
<http://www.cicb.net/en/home/examples>. Discuss how gestures and norms in one culture may have very different meanings in another culture.
4. **Jane Addams.** Have your students discuss the sociology of Jane Addams. In the discussion have them debate the role of the field in solving social problems. Have them answer the question should a sociologist be doing social change work?
5. **Theoretical Application.** Divide the students into four different groups and assign each group one of the major theoretical perspectives. As a class, come up with one topic to analyze (e.g., higher education). Then, have each group spend 10 minutes preparing their analysis before presenting their arguments to the entire class. Afterward, as a large class, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.
6. **Troubles and Issues.** Divide class into groups of three or four and have them choose a personal trouble that someone they know is going through. Then they should analyze how that trouble is connected to larger social issues and present their analysis to their classmates.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. **See For Yourself Troubles and Issues.** Assign an exercise on “Troubles and Issues” using key concepts presented in this chapter, including debunking, diversity, the research process, and so on. Have students write about or discuss the differences between troubles and issues.
2. **Sociological Imagination.** Assign students a “sociological imagination” exercise. Ask them to select a personal problem they are currently grappling with, like juggling work and school, finding adequate childcare, dealing with drug or alcohol abuse, or securing school financing. Have them first explain how they are coping with the problem as a “personal trouble,” and then have them consider how the problem is a “public issue” and explain how sociologists analyze it as an issue shaped by social structure.
3. **Diversity.** Divide students into small groups to examine their own diversity using the broad understanding of diversity presented in this chapter. Have them compare themselves to the emerging patterns of diversity in the United States and reflect on how they can prepare themselves to live with that diversity and to relate to it as developing sociologists. This would be a good time to introduce students to the *U.S. Census Bureau* (www.census.gov). If the class is small, conduct the exercise for the whole class.
4. **Theoretical Perspectives.** To ensure that students understand the major sociological perspectives, present them with an issue of contemporary concern—like homelessness—and

have them describe how they think functionalists, conflict theorists, symbolic interactionists and feminists would approach the issue. This could be conducted as an in-class exercise or assigned as a take-home paper and discussed later. In addition to exploring the approaches of the major theoretical perspectives, this exercise could also be organized by social location. Groups of students could be assigned to represent diverse social classes, race/ethnicity, and gender perspectives.

5. **Classic Sociologists.** Using *SocioWeb* (www.sonic.net/~markbl/socioweb/) have students select a classic sociologist that interests them (click on the “Giants in Sociology” link), and write a brief essay on the sociologist’s contributions to the field.
6. **Taking Action on Social Issues.** Students often want to know how they can get involved with improving social conditions. Have them visit www.uspirg.org and research a particular issue along with the things being done to deal with the issue and write a short paper or make a presentation to the class about the topic.
7. **Researching Sociological Perspectives.** Have the students write a report or answer a take-home question on the first exam about the three major sociological perspectives (if you want, include feminism and post-modernism) and identify one or two theorists for each group (e.g., Marx for Conflict Theory, Comte for Functionalism, etc.). Students can give an example of the contribution of each theorist.
8. **Globalization.** Students can discuss the context of globalization by using the living world around them. Have them discuss how globalization is part of their daily lives. Have them discuss how their Internet, cell phone, and television reflect global interconnectivity.
9. **Symbolic Interaction.** Have your students choose an event in the news that is controversial. In a discussion, have them deconstruct the different meanings given to the event by different participants. Have them discuss how defining the situation is important.
10. **Theorists.** The text does a good job of introducing students to the foundational theorists in sociology. Assign each student to dig deeper into the lives and scholarship of these people and present findings to the class. Add more theorists to get even broader diversity.

VIDEO SUGGESTIONS (Videos with a * next to them have corresponding activities below.)

- *Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory* (2011)
In 1993, a horrific triple child murder was discovered in West Memphis, Arkansas, but the reaction to it precipitated a horror of its own. This film follows up on the story of the three boys, called the West Memphis Three, who were convicted for this crime with questionable evidence. For years, the boys' fate sparked a mass movement striving to prove their innocence while the state was equally determined to avoid admitting it could have been wrong. Through the swirl of new evidence and suspects, the Three tell their own tale about enduring this injustice against the opinions of the victim's families in a debate that eventually comes to an inadequate resolution.

- *Inequality for All* (2013, 89 min.) *
A documentary that follows former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich as he looks to raise awareness of the country's widening economic gap.
- *Freakonomics* (2010, 85 min.)
A collection of documentaries that explores the hidden side of human nature through the use of the science of economics.
- *The Human Scale* (2012, 83 min.)
Half of the human population lives in urban areas. By 2050, this will increase to 80%. Life in a megacity is both enchanting and problematic. Today we face peak oil, climate change, loneliness, and severe health issues due to our way of life. But why? The Danish architect and professor, Jan Gehl, has studied human behavior in cities through four decades. He has documented how modern cities repel human interaction, and argues that we can build cities in a way that takes the human needs for inclusion and intimacy into account. *The Human Scale* meets thinkers, architects, and urban planners across the globe. It questions our assumptions about modernity, exploring what happens when we put people into the center of our planning.
- *Craigslist Joe* (2012, 90 min.)*
In a time when America's economy was crumbling and sense of community was in question, one guy left everything behind to see if he could survive solely on the support and goodwill of the 21st century's new town square: Craigslist.
- *Revenge of the Electric Car* (2011, 90 min.)*
Director Chris Paine takes his film crew behind the closed doors of Nissan, GM, and the Silicon Valley start-up Tesla Motors to chronicle the story of the global resurgence of electric cars.

VIDEO ACTIVITIES

Inequality for All

Have students watch the following YouTube video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTj9AcwkaKM>

After viewing, have them break up into small groups of 4 or 5 and discuss the causes, consequences, and possible solutions for the massive wealth and income gap in America.

Revenge of the Electric Car

Have your students watch *Revenge of the Electric Car* and write a report or develop a class discussion about how the history of the electric car affected the adoption of this technology, paying specific attention to industries that benefitted from delaying its adoption.

Craigslist Joe

Have students watch *Craigslist Joe*, write a report on how community was discovered online, and answer the following questions:

1. Is there a cultural imperative to caring for one another? Why or why not?
2. How could the findings of this documentary be used to make society a better place?

INTERNET EXERCISES

1. Visit *American Sociological Association* (www.asanet.org/), and investigate the ways in which students can get involved in the ASA through the student forum, the honors program, student travel, and other resources. Read through the online booklet, “Careers in Sociology.” Write a brief note explaining what you learned about “Careers in Sociology.” If you found a career that interests you, explain briefly what steps could advance the possibility of getting started in such a career.
2. Visit *Society for the Study of Social Problems* (www.sssp1.org). Look at the description of the society and its committees. Examine the links to other sociological sites of interest, as well as the most recent edition of the SSSP Newsletter. Write a brief note on what you found most interesting about this site or a resource on the site to share with other students in class.
3. Go to www.census.gov and:
 1. Identify the number of people living in the U.S. in 2015.
 2. List some topics that can be found on the census homepage
 3. Briefly give one or two examples of types of sociological studies you could develop using this website.
4. Develop an online study club. You could invite faculty and authors to be part of the club or to check in at will. Each month select a social problem or social issue of the clubs choosing to research. Have each club participant select an aspect of this topic to research and have them consolidate the findings into one location for literature search purposes and for doing research.
5. The European University Institute Max Weber Program allows students to see the importance of Weber for the field of sociology especially in Europe. Show students how Weber influenced the field into the modern period.
(<http://www.eui.eu/ProgrammesandFellowships/MaxWeberProgramme/Index.aspx>)
6. Jane Addams won a Nobel Peace Prize for her work applying sociology to solving social problems. The Nobel website offers a good overview of her work and speeches. Have your students analyze the website. Have them discuss how applied sociology emerged out of a situation and why sociology can solve social problems.
(http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1931/addams-bio.html)

Note: Some students may be interested in student membership and the discount offered by the ASA for student members or in eventually becoming members of the SSSP. These Internet Exercises and ones like them can be conducted within online course management systems, with students using the Discussion Board to share their findings.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Addams, Jane, 1930. *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House: September 1909 to September 1929*. New York, Macmillan. This book looks at the impact of Hull House on the community. It is a good reference book for understanding how research and activism, when sustained, can lead to social change.

Berger, Peter L. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. New York: Anchor. In this classic introduction to the discipline, Berger emphasizes how sociology can help debunk erroneous assumptions about human behavior and demystify the workings of the social world.

Best, Joel. 2001. *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling numbers from the media, politicians, and activists*. Berkeley: University of California. Best describes basic social statistics and how they are used and abused by media, politicians, and activists, through a systematic and enjoyable exploration of examples and issues.

Dolgon, Corey and Chris Baker. 2010. *Social Problem: A Service Learning Approach*. Sage. This book offers a good overview of the use of sociology in the solution to social problems. The approach taken to social problems helps students understand how they can be addressed by using the tools of the social sciences.

Lemert, Charles. 2006. *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life*. Third edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. This personal sociological journey illustrates the sociological imagination in action and demonstrates well the promise of sociological theory and research.

Zinn, Howard. 1980 (1995). *A People's History of the United States: 1492—Present*. Revised Edition. Harper Perennial. This classic, based on oral history and documentary analysis, presents a side of history ignored or misrepresented in standard accounts or official sources.

WEBSITE SUGGESTIONS

In addition to the Internet Exercises, you might find the following websites useful as resources for student research or as bases for discussions.

Public Agenda Online (publicagenda.org)

The organization regularly covers about 20 major social issues, presenting fast facts, research findings, public opinion surveys, and other analysis.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (www.aecf.org) is a good site for students to use for data on youth and related social issues and for the basics of data interpretation.

The *Southern Sociological Society* (<http://www.southernsociologicalsociety.org/>) is a sociological society based in North Carolina. The Southern Sociological Society puts out a journal (Social Currents) and holds a yearly conference.

Association for the Study of Religion (<http://www.sociologyofreligion.com/>) looks at sociological studies of religion. The ASR and the sociology of religion are influenced by the work of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, early pioneers in the field.

Public Sociology (www.sspps.wordpress.com) is a section of the ASA where scholars committed to engaging social issues with research.