**THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE 1**

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter introduces the student to sociology, which the authors define as the scholarly discipline concerned with the systematic study of human society. By focusing on three major topics, the sociological perspective, the historical development of sociology, and research methods, Eitzen, Baca Zinn and Eitzen Smith give a broad overview essential to the study of sociology.

The chapter underscores the need to be aware of our value stances or biases as we engage in the sociological endeavor. After reading this introductory chapter, the student should be left with an awareness of the strengths and limitations of the sociological perspective and how it applies to their future understanding of society. The chapter also anchors sociology in history and provides a foundation for understanding the social context out of which emerged the major classical theoretical perspectives. Finally, the overview of commonly applied sociological research methods should provide us with an understanding of the empirical nature of social research.

# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

* 1. Understand the assumptions of the sociological perspective.
  2. Describe the contributions of four key theorists to the development of sociology.
  3. Develop a sociological research question and propose a research method to answer it.
  4. Explain what it is about the sociological perspective that makes some people uncomfortable.

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**

Introduction

* 1. Each of us is controlled by social forces that shape our lives, including
     1. ideological traps that are so powerful we do not see them as traps shaping our personal choices;
     2. the people closest to us commanding our conformity to them;
     3. the characteristics of social groups we are part of influencing what we feel we can do or may be allowed to do;
     4. remote decisions made in corporate boardrooms, government bureaus, and foreign capitals affecting our tastes in style, interest rates, employment, and consumer prices; and
     5. our culture and its standards of what is presently considered right or wrong, moral or immoral.
  2. These are decided for us and incorporated inside us.
  3. Sociology – Understand the assumptions of the sociological perspective.

1. **Sociology** is defined as the scholarly discipline concerned with the systematic study of human society.
   * + 1. At the personal level, sociology investigates the causes and consequences of such phenomena as romantic love, violence, identity, conformity, deviance, personality, and interpersonal power.
       2. At the societal level, sociology examines and explains poverty, crime rates, racism, sexism, pollution, and political power.
       3. At the global level, sociology researches such phenomena as societal inequality, war, conflict resolution, immigration patterns, and population growth.
       4. Sociological insights are important because they help us understand why we behave as we do.

B. Assumptions of the Sociological Perspective

1. Individuals are, by their nature, social beings.
2. Human infants are totally dependent on others for an extended period of time, thus immersing children in social groups from birth.
3. Throughout history, humans have demonstrated a capacity to cooperate with others for survival.

2. Individuals are, for the most part, socially determined.

a. Society (e.g., rules, values, goals) is transmitted to the child through the family.

b. Individuals are products of their social environments.

c. Parents act as cultural agents, transferring the ways of the society to their children.

d. Parents transmit such things to their children as religious views, political attitudes, and attitudes towards other groups.

e. However, this does not imply a total **social determinism** (the assumptionthat human behavior is explained exclusively by social forces).

3. Individuals create, sustain, and change the social forms within which they conduct their lives.

a. Social groups of all sizes and types (families, peer groups, corporations, etc.) are made by people.

b. Interacting people create structures that become sources of control over them.

c. The continuous interaction of group members also changes the group itself.

**Discussion Point:**

How does the sociological perspective differ from our “everyday” way of looking at things? How can the sociological perspective help understand everyday events such as those we might encounter in a busy fast food restaurant?

i. Four important implications of groups being human-made:

aa. Social forms that are created have a certain momentum of their own that defies change thus taking on a sacred quality, the sanctity of tradition.

bb. Social organizations, because they are created and sustained by people, are imperfect.

cc. Through collective action, individuals are capable of changing the structure of society and even the course of history.

dd. Individuals are not passive; rather, through the process of **human agency**,they actively shape social life by adapting to, negotiating with, and changing social structures.

C. The Sociological Imagination

1. It is stimulated by a willingness to view the social world from the perspective of others;
2. it involves moving away from thinking about the world in terms of the individual and his/her problems and instead focusing on the social, economic, and historical circumstances;
3. it allows one to shift from focusing exclusively on the plight of individuals or a family by linking them to larger social forces such as national budgets, welfare policies, heath insurance costs, affordable housing, etc.;
4. it requires a detachment from the taken-for-granted assumptions about social life and establishing a critical distance; and
5. it allows us to see the solutions to social problems in terms of changing the structure of society rather than in “fixing” the individual.

1.2. The Historical Development of Sociology – Describe the contributions of four key theorists to the development of sociology.

A. Sociology emerged in Western Europe in the late eighteenth century in the Enlightenment, spurred by social changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, urbanization, capitalism, and the intellectual ideals of the period (e.g., progress, democracy, freedom, individualism, and the scientific method).

1. Religious dogma and unquestioned obedience to royal authority dominated the period before the Enlightenment.

2. Enlightenment intellectuals believed that human beings could rationally solve social problems and that society could be analyzed rationally.

B. Auguste Comte (1798–1857): The Science of Society

1. Founded sociology and coined the term, sociology, as the science of society and group life.

2. Sought to establish sociology as a science free of religious arguments about society and human nature.

3. Believed that **positivism**, which is the philosophy that knowledge should be based on systematic observation, experiments, and comparisons, could solve social problems such as poverty, crime, and war.

C. Emile Durkheim (1858–1917): Social Facts and the Social Bond

* 1. Provided the rationale for sociology by emphasizing **social facts**, which are external human factors such as tradition, values, population density, religious ideology, and laws that affect human behavior.
  2. His classic study, *Suicide* (1897), demonstrates how social factors explain individual behavior.
  3. Durkheim also pointed out the binding power of belief systems that form social bonds.
  4. Public ceremonies, rituals, and labeling people as deviant reaffirm what society deems to be right.
  5. Similarities, such as shared traditions, values, and ideology keep traditional societies together.
  6. Social differences, particularly in the division of labor, provide the social bond in complex societies.
  7. Key concepts introduced by Durkheim include social roles, socialization, anomie, deviant behavior, social control, and the social bond.

D. Karl Marx (1818–1883): Economic Determinism

1. Devoted his life to analyzing and criticizing the society around him.
2. Concerned himself with the gap between the people at the bottom and the elite in society.
3. Reasoned that the economic system found in society provides the basic social structures, which are the

a. system of stratification,

b. unequal distribution of resources,

c. the bias of the law, and

d. prevailing ideology.

4. Studied how capitalism and the owners of capital shaped society by

a. exploiting their workers for maximum profit;

b. using their economic power to keep the less powerful in their place and to benefit unequally from institutions controlled by capitalists; and

c. determining the prevailing ideology creating a sense of **false consciousness** (believing in ideas that are not in the objective interests of the working class but rather in the best

interests of the capitalist class), which contributed to the oppression of the working

class.

5. Social change occurs when the contradictions inherent in capitalism cause the working class to

a. recognize their oppression, and

b. develop **class consciousness** by recognizing their class interests, common oppression, and an understanding of who their oppressors are.

6. Marx made extraordinary contributions to core sociological concepts: systems of inequality, social class, power, alienation, and social movements.

E. Max Weber (1864–1920): A Response to Marx

1. Reacted to the writings of Karl Marx (who Weber considered too narrowly deterministic).

2. Weber contended

a. the basic structure of society comes from three sources: the political, economic, and cultural spheres, and that

b. political power may have its source in the **charisma**, or expressive qualities, of individual leaders, from economic resources, or in the structure of organizations.

3. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), Weber's most important work, demonstrates how the Protestant belief system made capitalism possible.

4. Weber added to the field of sociology several core concepts: power, ideology, charisma, bureaucracy, and social change.

1.3. The Craft of Sociology – Develop a sociological research question and propose a research method to answer it.

A. Sociological Questions

1. Sociological research depends on reliable data and logical reasoning. To make valid conclusions, sociologists must ask questions while acknowledging obstacles in the collection of data for answers to these questions.

1. Four types of sociological questions
   1. Factual questions try to identify “who,” “what,” “when,” and “where.”
   2. Comparative questions allow us to compare one area or group to others.
   3. Historical questions look for trends and changes over time.
   4. Theoretical questions seek to identify causal relationships.
2. Theoretical questions ask “why?”
3. A **sociological theory** is a set of ideas that explains a range of human behavior and a variety of social and societal events.
4. Theory explains social phenomena but also guides the research.

B. Sources of Data

1. Sociologists must obtain evidence that is beyond reproach. The four primary sources of data are:

**RESEARCH METHODS:**

**Thinking Like a Sociologist**

The authors discuss how sociologists interested in race and class inequality might research the trends revealed in a recent report released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation indicating the White and Asian children are far better positioned for success than Black, Latino, and American Indian children. Sample questions that sociologists might create depending on their particular interests and theoretical orientation are provided and broken down into the following categories: Factual Questions, Comparative Questions, Historical Questions, and Theoretical Questions.

* 1. Survey research including personal interviews, written questionnaires and online surveys. Information is collected either from all possible subjects or from a **sample** (representative part of the population)
     1. **Longitudinal studies** collect data from the same people over many years and hold special promise for understanding human behavior
  2. Controlled experiments are used to understand the cause-and-effect relationship among a few **variables** (something that can be changed, such as a characteristic, value or belief). Variables are either independent (the presumed cause) or dependent (the presumed effect). Participants are organized into two groups:
     1. Control groups include subjects who are not exposed to the independent variable.
     2. Experimental group subjects are exposed to the independent variable.
  3. Two methods of observation:
     1. The researcher joins the group being studied without intervening in a participant observation
     2. The researcher does not join the group being studied in nonparticipant observation and the goal of this observation type is to observe events and social interactions in their natural environment.
  4. Existing data can be used to test theories using statistical techniques and describe populations and the effects of social variables on dependent variables.

C. Objectivity

1. Sociologists struggle with the dilemma of being members of society with beliefs, feelings and biases, while also having the professional task of studying society in a scientific way. This concept of **value neutrality** is problematic for three reasons:
   1. Should scientists be morally indifferent to the implications of their research?
   2. A purely neutral position is most likely not possible because the values of the researcher inevitably enter into the choices of what will be studied.
   3. Human values influence the vantage point from which to gain access to information about a particular social organization.

1.4. A Challenge to Think Sociologically – Explain what it is about the sociological perspective that makes some people uncomfortable.

1. The study of sociology is challenging for several reasons:
2. Uncertainty of subject behaviors
3. It has more than one right answer.
4. It challenges and critically examines long-standing cultural beliefs, institutions, and behaviors.

**SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES**

1. Select an everyday situation, perhaps waiting to be served at a restaurant, stopping for a red light, or purchasing goods at a department store. Discuss the social forces that shape these activities for members of different groups. Discuss the problems students encounter with applying the “sociological perspective.”
2. Invite a member of the committee at your university that is charged with protecting the human subjects of university-sponsored research to speak to the class and explain the guidelines used in reviewing research proposals.

3. Have students view the film *Obedience* (1965, New York University Film Library) or *Quiet Rage: The Stanford Prison Study* and discuss the research conducted by Milgram or Zimbardo. Have them consider the following questions:

a. Were the scientists “morally indifferent” to the implications of their research?

b. Should the scientists be “morally indifferent” to the value of the research and its findings?

1. Was the research ethical?
2. Should research that has the potential of helping us understand serious social problems be conducted regardless of the potential consequences on the subjects?

# SUGGESTED READINGS

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