

Chapter 1.1: What is Sociology?

Section 1: What is Sociology and How Can I Use It?

CHAPTER 1.1: WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

If you are going to apply sociology, you first need to know what sociology is! In this section, we will introduce you to sociology and identify some general ways to use sociology. In each chapter of this book, we will provide 1) definitions to some basic terms, 2) a brief overview of the topic, 3) tools for applying the terms and topics, and finally 4) some tasks for you to do on your own to further clarify the terms, topics and tools of each chapter. So, each chapter will contain the following sections: Terms, Topics, Tools, and Tasks. Additionally, we will begin each chapter with a quick start list that summarizes the main take home points of the chapter.

QUICK START: In this chapter, you will learn

- What sociology is, and why you should care.
- How sociology is similar and different from other sciences.
- How you can use sociology.
- The sociological perspective.

TERMS

In order to follow along with the material in the rest of this chapter, you need to have some terminology under your belt. In each chapter, we will introduce and define new terms.

Sociology	The study of social interaction and social organization.
Social Interaction	How people interact in groups or how they interact with themselves as a result of group influences.
Social Organization	How groups arrange, coordinate and control social interaction.
Group	People who share, and are linked by, a similar race, gender, sexuality, family, work, church, neighborhood, etc.

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Attitudes	Ways of thinking, feeling and intentions to behave that set the stage for our action. Sociologists contend that these are learned and are expressed through collective action.
Beliefs	Things that we contend that we “know” exist. These are viewed individually and collectively.
Values	Beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that groups collectively determine to be of worth.
Behavior	The things people say or do as a result of their attitudes, beliefs or values; in other words, as a result of the influence or expectation of other people.
Sociologist	A scientist who is formally trained to employ the sociological imagination and the scientific method to understand human interaction and groups.
Social Problem	Problems, created by collective attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior, that affect groups.
Social Change	Change in a society’s social structure that results in change in social behavior.
Sociological Imagination	An ability to be critical of the world around you, to see how the world influences you and others, and how you and others influence the world.
Culture	Shared attitudes, beliefs, values, meanings, and behaviors.
Society	Groups of people who interact often and who depend on these interactions for survival.
Scientific Method	A research process for solving problems and testing research questions that usually includes the statement of a problem, a way to research it, collect information about it and make sense of the information.

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TOPICS

What is **sociology**? Sociology is a science of **social interaction** and **social organization**. In explaining social interaction and social organization, sociologists look at how people in **groups** construct **attitudes, beliefs, values** and **behavior**, and how these in turn influence social interaction and social organization. An understanding of social interaction and social organization allows **sociologists** to identify social **problems** and to suggest strategies for **social change**.

Some people find it easier to understand what sociology is by comparing and contrasting it to other social science disciplines. Below is a table that summarizes other social sciences. These are crude summaries. Each discipline is much more complex than what is depicted below.

Discipline	Focus	Contrast
Anthropology	Studies cultures of past communities and present day non-industrialized communities. Focuses on small group dynamics.	Sociology includes cultural studies, but also goes beyond culture into other aspects of societies. Sociology focuses on small group dynamics as well as the larger society.
Social Work	Studies individual experiences within modern day social problems. Focuses on individual symptom management of problems.	Sociology includes solutions to and causes of social problems. Sociology focuses on group experiences of and group solutions to problems, not individual experiences or solutions.
Psychology	Studies personality, identity, and neurology to explain individual experiences and problems. Provides individual solutions.	Sociology includes the social influences on personality and identity. It does not explore neurological or physiological influences. It offers solutions that target societal level changes, not individual change.
Economics	Studies how large groups can allocate social and natural resources efficiently. Focuses on large groups.	Sociology includes the study of how groups distribute resources, but also explains why they do so and what influences why they do so.

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What all these disciplines share is a focus on how people interact with other people. As you can see, many of the topics of other social science disciplines would also be of interest to sociologists. However, sociologists would often take a different perspective on the topic. Sociologists explain most issues, experiences, and problems as social. That is, they think these issues, experiences, and problems are largely shaped or caused by the influence that groups of people have on each other. That is a very abstract distinction. Let's look at an example.

Let's say a large corporation is concerned about the amount of money their medical plans are spending to treat depression among their employees. How do you think each discipline listed above would address this client's problem? At first glance, it might seem that depression would be outside the realm of Sociology. But there are definite patterns among groups of people in the incidence of depression. For example, men and women differ in their experience of and reaction to depression. Sociologists would look at this and other social patterns in depression such as differences among races, social class, religion, and education. A sociologist might find higher rates of depression among women in the corporation, and among people with lower income or lower social status within the corporation. A sociologist might argue that the corporation needs to examine its opportunities for success within the company, including raise structures, promotions, mentoring, and privileges.

Anthropologists might look at cross-cultural differences in the incidence and experience of depression. They might find that it is more common among societies today than it was in the past. Social workers might look at ways we can change our behavior to manage the symptoms of depression. Like sociologists, psychologists would try to explain why depression occurs. However, unlike sociologists, psychologists would likely point to innate, individual characteristics that are causing the depression such as problems in an individual's thought processes, or specific problems in an individual's childhood. Hence, a psychologist would try to treat depression one individual at a time with therapy or drugs. In contrast, most economists probably would not be too interested in the experience of depression. They might be interested in how groups differ in how they distribute resources to treat depression, such as medication or therapy, and how effective those distributions are. For example, they might look to see if a country with socialized medicine had lower costs for treating depression than did a country with privatized medicine. Finally, the physical sciences such as biology or chemistry might look at the physiological causes of depression.

So you see, sociologists understand most things as social. Sociologists would say most of who you are is because of the influences of your family, your peers, your religion, your education, etc. There are many other disciplines we could have listed such as political science and communications, which are very similar to Sociology in their perspective and explanations. They just focus on one type of social interaction, whereas sociology includes all social interaction. This is why August Comte (an early sociologist) referred to sociology as the "queen of the social sciences."

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TOOLS

Throughout this book, in the Tools section, we are going to look at sociological tools. Tools are methods for applying sociology in order to understand social reality. In general, we can divide these tools up into two categories. One group of tools involves tools of perspective, or how sociologists look at social problems, issues, and phenomenon. The other set of tools involves tools of action, or ways of doing things. Let's take these two sets of tools one at a time.

Perspective: The primary tool at this level of introduction to sociology is the **sociological imagination**. This is your ability to be critical of the world around you, to see how the world influences you and others, and how you and others influence the world. This perspective enables you to understand why people behave as they do. In turn, that understanding enables you to solve social problems. Using your sociological imagination, you see that people create many aspects of our lives and our world. For example, sociologists would say that marriage is a “human-made” product. We created the idea of legally linking romantic partners together. Why? How? Who? These are the kinds of questions that the sociological perspective drives you to answer.

Applying the Sociological Perspective

“Studying Sociology turned out to be an oddly personal experience for me. I became more aware and understanding not only of society, but of my peers, my family and myself. I found that, in building the sociological imagination, I not only learned to pick out possible social problems but I also found an understanding of how to go about finding possible solutions. Aside from giving me the general knowledge that I had hoped to get, I also found another pleasant side effect of studying Sociology. I feel like I have found a new voice in Sociology, one that I may be able to use to help make positive changes in society, one that will help me in all my future goals, and one that has brought me back to an old passion for writing that I was sure I had lost. Sociology is a knowledge that is powerful and, like knowledge, Sociology is power!”

Housewife, mom and Introduction to Sociology Student

The sociological imagination looks at the influence of **culture** and **society** on human interaction. We will use the sociological imagination throughout this book to explore other dimensions of social life, such as deviance, gender, race and ethnicity, social class, sexuality, education, family, religion, health, economics, law, the military, the environment, and work and occupations. What the sociological imagination tells us is that all of these things are sets of social behaviors-- behaviors that are strongly influenced by the expectations of others.

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People often think of tools as physical objects designed to help accomplish some purpose. A hammer is a tool. A screwdriver is a tool. And now you're aware that ways of looking at things are tools. Methods and procedures are also tools. Sociology, like other sciences, uses the **scientific method** to solve problems. In this way, the scientific method is a tool. You have been exposed to the scientific method throughout most of your years of formal education. But how often have you actually thought of it as a problem-solving device?

The scientific method is a series of steps used to solve a question or problem. Below we summarize the steps involved. Each step is a tool.

1. Identify a question or problem
2. Learn what else is known on this question or problem
3. Choose a way to observe the question or problem to gain new insight
4. Collect, analyze and interpret observational data
5. Disseminate findings

In the next chapter, we are going to introduce you to different uses of sociology. Then we will review ten tools for applying sociology including: the sociological perspective, concepts, applying theories, creating theories, data collection methods, measurement, data analysis, program planning, needs assessment and evaluation, and communication.

TASKS

Below are some exercises to help get you started in applying sociology. Think through your answers and write them down. This will help develop your communication skills. You should be able to complete all these tasks after reading this chapter.

- Write a business letter or email summarizing and applying sociology
- Use a basic sociological perspective to “make sense” of a situation
- Interview a client
- Your neighbors are constantly complaining to you about each other. Each family has different skin colors and different religions. How can you use your new sociological perspective to improve your neighbor's relations?