

## Chapter 1.2: How can I use Sociology?

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

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#### CHAPTER 1.2: HOW CAN I USE SOCIOLOGY?

**QUICK START:** In this chapter you will learn

- What you can do with sociology.
- The difference between basic, applied and clinical sociology.
- How to apply the sociological perspective.
- How theory fits into applied sociology.

#### TERMS

<b>Applied Sociology</b>	Using sociological tools to address a specific social problem, often for a particular group of people.
<b>Client-Centered Work</b>	Projects initiated, designed, and conducted solely to solve a client's specific real world question or problem.
<b>Sociological Perspective</b>	Identifying patterns in human interaction, how and why these patterns exist, the consequences of them, and how to reproduce or change the patterns.
<b>Intervention</b>	Some project, program, plan or any other artificial social construction that is implemented in human social life.
<b>Clinical Sociology</b>	Using sociology primarily for the purpose of diagnosing and measuring interventions to improve human interaction.
<b>Sociological Practice</b>	A term used to denote both applied sociology and clinical sociology.
<b>Basic Sociology</b>	Using sociology primarily to produce explanations of social phenomena.
<b>Sociological Theory</b>	An explanation of group attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior.

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### TOPICS

You're studying sociology, and before too long you'll ask yourself a common question: "What can I do with this stuff?" It's a good question, and one with a good answer. Let's look at how sociology can be used.

All sciences have at least two thrusts: basic (some people like to call this "pure") and applied. In basic science, the goal is to produce good theory. You are probably saying, "Theory? Who cares?" But, before you ignore this important tool, think about this: If you want to fix something, wouldn't it help to know how it works? Theories are efforts to explain how things work. For example, fixing a car's engine would be much easier if we knew how it worked. The better the understanding of how it works, the better and faster we are in fixing it. But, theory isn't enough. Having an idea about how a car's engine works and using that idea to actually fix the car are often two different things. So, sciences have applied aspects, too. In this example, fixing the car is the application of the theory. In applied science, the goal is to solve real world problems. To solve real world problems, applied sociologists must know theory and how to apply it.

You may be asking: What do you mean by "**applied sociology**?" How's this for a definition?

"Any use (often client-centered) of the sociological perspective and/or its tools in the understanding of, intervention in, and/or enhancement of human social life."  
(From Steele, S. & Iutovich, J. *Directions in Applied Sociology*, SAS, 1997, p. 154).

Let's dissect this definition. Notice that the definition contains both elements of theory and practice. Any use or application suggests knowledge and a distinct approach. The notion of "**client-centered**" work requires some thought because it really separates basic from applied work. In client-centered work, someone other than the person investigating it presents the problem. These problems can be "dirty" in that they exist in natural settings that may, in the best of times, be less than perfect for collecting information or using theory. Yet, they are of great value largely because they are real and need solutions!

The "**sociological perspective**" refers to identifying patterns in human interaction, how and why these patterns exist, the consequences of them, and how to reproduce or change the patterns. You will learn more about the sociological perspective in the next chapter. It is the first of the ten tools we will discuss. For now, understand that there are many ways to "look at" a situation. The sociological perspective is a distinct and powerful way to look at human interactions.

"Understanding of, **intervention in**" and/or "enhancement of human social life" means that applied sociologists work to advance our collective knowledge of social phenomena, or to solve

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problems (intervention), or improve social interaction. Often, applied sociologists work on all three of these dimensions simultaneously.

We will use the term “applied sociology” throughout this book. We wish it were that simple. Modern sociologists use a variety of terms when they talk about actually applying their discipline. Some sociologists who use the discipline for the purpose of diagnosing and measuring intervention call what they are doing “**clinical sociology**.” Others suggest that **sociological practice** is a better term, because it is a term that denotes both clinical and applied. Knowing these different terms for applied sociology should help you when you read other sociological material. For now, let’s just stick to “applied sociology.”

Here’s an example of basic and applied sociology. What happens when organizations change? Much scientific energy has been devoted to determining how organizations work. How big should they be? What should they look like, or how should they be structured? What kinds of leaders are best? These questions are all solid sociological questions for which basic researchers have toiled to answer. Basic sociologists initiate projects primarily because of their own interest in the topic. Whatever the topic, they primarily seek to build or test **sociological theory**.


Now, let’s look at an applied angle of this same problem. Suppose someone decides to change the organization in which you work. This becomes a real world problem, not only for the person who needs to lead the change, but also for the person who lives and works in the organization. Wouldn’t it be nice if the people responsible for these changes had a little basic theory under their managerial belts? If this sounds like theory and practice, or basic and applied sciences, are linked, you are right! Good practice demands good theory. Whether formally trained or not, a good plumber knows a great deal of physics’ theory. And, a good manager needs a good deal of organizational theory.

In sum, both applied and basic science is needed in any discipline. **Basic sociology** focuses on testing or developing theory directly. Applied sociology uses theory as a tool to solve a client-centered problem. In basic sociology, theory is often the end. In applied sociology, theory is a means to an end. Applied sociology is not atheoretical, rather, theory plays a different role in applied sociology than it does in basic sociology.


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### TOOLS

When it comes right down to it, what special skills and abilities will sociology provide? Let's look at three.

Tool		What is it?
<b>The Sociological Perspective</b>		The way sociologists view a problem can be a powerful tool in understanding social issues and how people act. We want you to try the components of this perspective and continue to practice them hereafter.
<b>Looking at the “big picture.”</b>		<p data-bbox="690 772 1443 804"><b>How do I do it?</b></p> <p data-bbox="690 810 1443 1060">Sociology compels people to focus on the social situation -- the big picture. It supports this view whether looking between two individuals, among groups or among societies. Some job applications of this skill include; organizational design and development, project design and management, continuous improvement, strategic and community planning, policy formation, and forecasting.</p> <ol data-bbox="738 1102 1443 1575" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="738 1102 1443 1270">1. Start by looking at social interactions at the next level up from the person and personalities. For example, can you see personal problems in getting an education from the point of view of a student or instructor?</li> <li data-bbox="738 1281 1443 1417">2. Then, work your way “up” by moving to the next level. In this example, consider your class, your school, education in your society, global education.</li> <li data-bbox="738 1428 1443 1501">3. Now, consider the forces that influence each of these levels.</li> <li data-bbox="738 1512 1443 1575">4. What impact are these influences and levels having on the “person” involved in the situation?</li> </ol>

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Tool		What is it?
<b>Problem identification and problem solving</b>		<p>Sociological training provides abilities and tools to identify, measure and solve problems. Prepared to use research skills and statistical analysis, a graduate has the ability to build solution strategies. Some job applications of this skill include; needs assessment, corporate culture analysis, market research, project and program evaluation, and data analysis.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Instead of blaming the persons who may have a problem, consider the situation in which a problem arises.</li> <li>2. Ask yourself “How is this situation defined, that is, was the situation “set up” to produce these outcomes? For example, if the boss complains that she “can’t get good people to fill a job,” consider “is the job structured in such a way that virtually nobody could do it?”</li> </ol>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dealing with human interaction</li> </ul>		<p>A complex world increases the need for understanding of human interaction and social relationships. Sociology encourages understanding and respect for human cultures, beliefs and values. A sociological approach recognizes the complexity and importance of these human differences. Some job applications of this skill include; human resources management and relations, team work and team building, interpersonal relationships, and respect for cultural diversity such as age, gender, ethnicity, and race.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rather than looking primarily at the internal or personal motivations for creating human action, ask yourself what is expected of interaction “between” or “among” people in different situations.</li> <li>2. Try to identify the expected patterns or rituals of interaction that may have some impact on what people do.</li> </ol>

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### TASKS

Some of you reading this may not become sociology majors, but you'll be stronger, no matter what you do, if you add a sociological approach to your personal tool kit. And, the views and perspectives that you are learning in sociology can only be improved by applying them. Here is an exercise to help you apply sociology.

- A city is running out of room in its landfill (i.e., garbage dump). City leaders are looking for a town in the surrounding area willing to sell their land to serve as a new landfill. Use your sociological perspective to identify the pros and cons for a town considering placing a bid for the landfill. The landfill will bring jobs and revenue to the town, but will also bring a host of possible problems, namely environmental dilemmas. Use your sociological perspective to identify the pros and cons to the town. What social factors shape the pros and cons you identify? And how will the pros and cons you identify shape the town's culture and society?