Lecture Notes

# Chapter 1: Sociology: A Unique Way to View the World

## Learning Objectives

1. Explain the Sociological Perspective.
2. Describe why sociology can be useful for us.
3. Explain how the model works with examples

## Chapter Overview

Chapter one provides students with a basic overview of what sociology is and the assumptions that underlie sociology. The differences between sociology and common sense are then outlined. The sociological perspective and sociological imagination are first introduced to students in chapter one. Further, the types of questions sociologists ask, how the topics sociologists study differ from other social science disciplines, why they study sociology, and the types of jobs sociologists do are discussed. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the various levels of analysis sociologists use, and an introduction to the social world model that will be utilized throughout the book.

## Lecture Outline

I. What Do We Mean By “Our Social World”?

A. Shared expectations are necessary to avoid chaos and create order

B. The social world is something that we both influence and are influenced by

C. Humans are fundamentally social beings

II. What Is Sociology?

A. *Sociology* is the scientific study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior

B. Sociologists attempt to analyze and explain why people interact with others, how groups are organized and function, the power structure of society, and how groups deal with conflict and change

i. Sociologists are more interested in group processes and patterns than in individual behaviors

ii. Sociologists study groups of varying sizes

1. *Dyads* – groups of two people

2. *Small groups* – three or more interacting people

3. *Larger groups* – organizations like sporting clubs or religious congregations (largest large groups include ethnic groups and national organizations)

4. *Nations*

5. *Globalization* – the process by which the entire world is becoming a single interdependent entity

C. Assumptions underlying sociology

i. People are social by nature

ii. People live most of their lives belonging to social groups

iii. Interactions between individuals and groups are a two-way process

iv. Recurrent social patterns, ordered behavior, shared experiences, and common understandings characterize groups

v. The processes of conflict and change are natural and inevitable

III. Sociology versus Common Sense

A. We all have assumptions based on our past experiences and stereotypes

B. *Common sense* – taken-for-granted ideas that seem reasonable to most people

C. Sociologists rely on scientific testing, not common sense beliefs

i. *Scientific research methods* – planned, systematic, objective, and replicable (repeatable) techniques – used to collect data

ii. Sociologists intentionally set up studies to disprove their assumptions

iii. Many scientific tests disconfirm common sense assumptions

D. Common sense beliefs and social science findings

i. Many of our common sense beliefs are challenged by social scientific evidence

1. For example, Belief: *Most of the differences in the behaviors of women and men are based on “human nature”;* research shows, however, that the culture (beliefs, values, rules, and way of life) that people learn as they grow up determines how biological tendencies are played out

2. For example, Belief: *Given high divorce rates in the United States and Canada, marriages are in serious trouble;* research indicates, however, that although the divorce rate in North America is high, the rate of marriage is also one of the highest in the world and individuals in these countries spend more years of their lives in marriage than at any other time in history

ii. Accurate information gleaned from sociological research can be the basis for more rational and just social policies

IV. The Sociological Perspective and the Sociological Imagination

A. What happens in the social world affects individuals’ lives

B. *Sociological perspective* – personal experiences are best understood by examining the broader social context

C. *Sociological imagination* (C. Wright Mills) – recognizing the relationship between individual experiences (private troubles) and public issues

i. Sociologists emphasize that private troubles may be caused by public issues, although individuals are unlikely to notice this

V. Questions Sociologists Ask—and Don’t Ask

A. Sociologists ask questions that can be answered objectively and scientifically

B. They do not make judgments about what beliefs are right or wrong or about moral issues involving philosophy, religion, values, or opinion

C. Complete objectivity is difficult (perhaps impossible) but peer review helps sociologists remain accountable for objectivity

D. *Applied sociologists* carry out research that helps organizations solve problems

VI. The Social Sciences: A Comparison

A. All social scientists use the *scientific method* to study various aspects of human life

B. *Cultural anthropologists,* the subfield of anthropologists most closely related to sociology, study the culture or way of life of a society

C. *Psychologists* study individual behaviors and internal mental processes (e.g., motivation, perception)

i. Although psychologists may study groups, they are most concerned with how groups affect individuals internally

D. *Political scientists* study governmental and power systems

E. *Economists* study economic conditions and, specifically, how individuals organize, produce, consume, and distribute material goods

F. *Sociologists* focus primarily on groups and social structures

VII. Why Study Sociology … And What Do Sociologists Do?

A. Sociologists study a variety of topics

B. Sociology in our Social World (High School Dropouts: Causes, Consequences, and Cures)

C. The practical significance of the sociological perspective is that it:

i. fosters greater self-awareness and encourages a more complete understanding of social situations

ii. helps people understand and evaluate problems

iii. cultivates an understanding of diverse cultural perspectives

iv. provides a means to assess the impact of social policies

v. reveals the complexities of social life and provides methods of inquiry to study them

vi. provides useful skills in interpersonal relationships, critical thinking, problem solving, data collection and analysis, and decision-making

D. What Sociologists Do

i. Training in sociology can be beneficial on the job market

ii. Most sociologists work in academia, but others are involved in governmental or social services, or work as business consultants

E. What employers want and what Sociology majors bring to a career

i. Sociology majors learn many of the skills employers seek in new employees, including:

1. Knowledge of global issues

2. Sensitivity to diversity

3. Sociological perspective on the United States and world

4. Communication skills

5. Effective interaction in groups

6. Analytical and research skills

7. Computer and technical literacy

8. Flexibility, adaptability, and multitasking

9. Interpersonal skills

10. Effective leadership skills

11. Organized thoughts and information and plan effectively

12. Ability to conceptualize and solve problems and be creative

13. Work with others

14. Personal values

VIII. The Social World Model

A. *Levels of analysis* – groups of various sizes that move from very small dyad to the global society.

i. The social world model helps us picture the levels of analysis in our social surroundings as an interconnected series of small groups, organizations, institutions, and societies

ii. The social world is a linked system, made up of increasingly larger unites

iii. No one unit of the social world can stand alone

B. Social Structures

i. *Social units* – interconnected parts of the social world, ranging from small groups to societies

ii. *Social structure* – the people and groups that bring order to our lives

1. The social structure holds social units together

iii. *Social institutions* – provide the rules, roles, and relationships set up to meet human needs and direct and control human behavior

1. Social institutions are interconnected – changes in one impact the others

iv. *National society* – a population of people, usually living within a specified geographic area, who are connected by common ideas and who are subject to a particular political authority

1. Each national society has its own way of life

2. Some national societies have multiple cultures living in one geographic location under one political authority

C. *Social processes* – the actions taken by people in social units

i. *Process of socialization* – the process that teaches individuals to be a productive member of society

1. Conflict occurs over these and other scarce resources

ii. *Process of change* – every social unit is continually changing

1. Sociologists identify and explain these processes – they do not generally deem them “good” or “bad”

2. Without social processes, social units would be lifeless

D. *The environment* – the setting that surrounds each social unit

i. The environment includes everything that influences the social unit

E. Studying the social world: Levels of analysis

i. Sociologists choose different theories and methods to explain human behavior based on the level of analysis

ii. There are three primary levels of analysis:

1. *Micro-level analysis –* a focus on individual or small group interactions

a. Important because micro interactions form the basis of all social organizations

2. *Meso-level analysis* – a focus on intermediate-sized units smaller than an entire nation (but can include national institutions)

a. Important for the study of processes and institutions in a society

3. *Macro-level analysis –* a focus on entire nations, global forces, and international social trends

a. Important to the understanding of how larger social forces shape everyday life

F. Each of the three levels of analysis adds depth and understanding to any topic

G. The distinctions between the three levels are not sharply delineated

H. The social world model allows us to take each social unit or process and examine how it is connected to other aspects in the social world. Doing so allows us to comprehend the entire social world and its parts

I. The Social World Model and this Book

i. The social world model will be used throughout the text as the framework for understanding the social units, processes, and surrounding environment

IX. What Have We Learned?

A. How can sociology help me understand my own life?

i. If we really want to understand our lives, we need to comprehend the various levels of analysis that affect our lives and the dynamic connections between those levels

ii. Through applying our sociological imagination, we can learn to communicate more effectively and understand interactions with others

iii. Through the understanding of organizations and bureaucracies, sociology can help make us all better family member, citizens and coworkers.