

WHAT SOCIOLOGY OFFERS

A sociological look at the world provides a number of unique benefits and perspectives. Sociology provides an understanding of social issues and patterns of behavior. It helps us identify the social rules that govern our lives. Sociologists study how these rules are created, maintained, changed, passed between generations, and shared between people living in various parts of the world. They also study what happens when these rules are broken.

Sociology helps us understand the workings of the social systems within which we live our lives. Sociologists put our interactions with others into a social context. This means they look not only at behaviors and relationships, but also how the larger world we live in influences these things. Social structures (the way society is organized around the regulated ways people interrelate and organize social life) and social processes (the way society operates) are at work shaping our lives in ways that often go unrecognized. Because of this perspective, sociologists will often say that, as individuals, we are social products. Even though we recognize their existence, these structures and processes may “appear to people in the course of daily life as through a mysterious fog” (Lemert 2001, 6). Sociologists strive to bring these things out of the fog, to reveal and study them, and to examine and explain their interrelationships and their impacts on individuals and groups. By describing and explaining these social arrangements and how they shape our lives, sociologists help us to make sense of the world around us and better understand ourselves.

Sociology helps us understand why we perceive the world the way we do. We are inundated with messages in a variety of forms about how we, and the world around us, both are and should be. These messages come in forms as diverse as guidance from parents and teachers, laws handed down by religious and political entities, and advertisements ranging from pitches for athletic shoes to feeding hungry children. Sociology helps us examine the types of messages we are constantly receiving, their source, how and why they influence us, and our own roles in producing, perpetuating, and changing them.

Sociology helps us identify what we have in common within, and between, cultures and societies. Sociologists know that, although people in different parts of the city, country, or world dress differently, speak differently, and have many different beliefs and customs, many of the same types of social forces are at work shaping their lives. This is an especially important perspective in a world where media headlines are often accused of focusing on divisive issues. Sociologists look for what social structure and processes mean for various groups. They look at how various groups shape, and are impacted, by society. Sociologists can help groups find common concerns, understand other groups’ perspectives, and find ways to work together rather than work at odds with each other.

Sociology helps us understand why and how society changes. Obviously, the social world is constantly changing. This change has been a major interest to sociologists from the beginning of the discipline. However, many sociologists believe that sociology should not stop with only explaining society and how and why the world changes. They argue that sociologists also have an obligation to act, using their unique skills and perspectives to work to improve the world. Sociology, they argue, is a “field of inquiry simultaneously concerned with understanding, explaining, criticizing, and improving (*italics mine*) the human condition” (Restivo 1991, 4). Armed with a sociological perspective, we can more effectively take action if we don’t like what is happening. We can better participate in shaping the future for ourselves and for others.

Sociology provides us theoretical perspectives within which to frame these understandings and research methods that allow us to study social life scientifically. Sociology is a social science. That means sociologists work to understand society in very structured, disciplined ways. Like scientists who study the physical world, sociologists follow scientific guidelines that incorporate an assortment of theories and methods that provide for accuracy in gathering, processing, and making sense of information. In the case of sociology, theories focus on how social relationships operate. They provide a way of explaining these relationships. Scientific methods provide ways of generating accurate research results.

Sociology is not just common sense. Results of sociological research may be unexpected. They often show that things are not always, or even usually, what they initially seem. “People who like to avoid shocking discoveries, who prefer to believe that society is just what they were taught in Sunday School, who like the safety of the rules and maxims of what Alfred Schultz . . . has called ‘the world-taken-for-granted’, should stay away from sociology” (Berger 1963, 24). This challenge means that sociological findings are often at odds with so-called common sense,

or those things that “everybody knows.” What we think of as common sense, or something that everybody knows, is actually based on our own experiences and the ideas and stereotypes we hold. This gives us a very limited view of how the larger world actually is. Taking a sociological perspective requires that we look beyond our individual experiences to better understand everyday life (Straus 1994). It allows us to look for the social forces that impact our lives and form those experiences. Once we have a solid understanding of these forces, we can better address them. For example, a common perception is that suicide is an act of those with individual psychological problems. However, an early sociological study of suicide by Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) revealed the importance of social factors, including relationships within church and family, in suicide (Durkheim 1966). Another common perception is that crimes are always committed by some “criminal element,” identifiable as troublemakers. In his textbook on social problems, Thomas Sullivan (1973, 296) introduces the chapter on crime by arguing that this is a far too simplistic view of criminality. He notes a study (Zimbardo 1973) in which researchers abandoned a car on a New York City street and watched from a hidden position to see if it was vandalized and by whom. The vandals discovered by the researchers included a family, a person with a toddler in a stroller, and many people who were well dressed and interacted with people who passed by during their activities.