

Introduction to Sociology



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Preface

About OpenStax College

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About This Book

Welcome to *Introduction to Sociology*, an OpenStax College resource created with several goals in mind: accessibility, affordability, customization, and student engagement—all while encouraging learners toward high levels of learning. Instructors and students alike will find that this textbook offers a strong foundation in sociology. It is available for free online and in low-cost print and e-book editions.

To broaden access and encourage community curation, *Introduction to Sociology* is “open source” licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) license. Everyone is invited to submit examples, emerging research, and other feedback to enhance and strengthen the material and keep it current and relevant for today’s students. You can make suggestions by contacting us at info@openstaxcollege.org. You can find the status of the project, as well as alternate versions, corrections, etc., on the StaxDash at <http://openstaxcollege.org> (<http://openstaxcollege.org>).

To the Student

This book is written for you and is based on the teaching and research experience of numerous sociologists. In today’s global socially networked world, the topic of Sociology is more relevant than ever before. We hope that through this book, you will learn how simple, everyday human actions and interactions can change the world. In this book, you will find applications of Sociology concepts that are relevant, current, and balanced.

To the Instructor

This text is intended for a one-semester introductory course. Since current events influence our social perspectives and the field of Sociology in general, OpenStax College encourages instructors to keep this book fresh by sending in your up-to-date examples to info@openstaxcollege.org so that students and instructors around the country can relate and engage in fruitful discussions.

General Approach

Introduction to Sociology adheres to the scope and sequence of a typical introductory sociology course. In addition to comprehensive coverage of core concepts, foundational scholars, and emerging theories, we have incorporated section reviews with engaging questions, discussions that help students apply the sociological imagination, and features that draw learners into the discipline in meaningful ways. Although this text can be modified and reorganized to suit your needs, the standard version is organized so that topics are introduced conceptually, with relevant, everyday experiences.

Features of OpenStax *Introduction to Sociology*

The following briefly describes the special features of this text.

Modularity

This textbook is organized on Connexions (<http://cnx.org> (<http://cnx.org>)) as a collection of modules that can be rearranged and modified to suit the needs of a particular professor or class. That being said, modules often contain references to content in other modules, as most topics in sociology cannot be discussed in isolation.

Learning Objectives

Every module begins with a set of clear and concise learning objectives. These objectives are designed to help the instructor decide what content to include or assign, and to guide the student with respect to what he or she can expect to learn. After completing the module and end-of-module exercises, students should be able to demonstrate mastery of the learning objectives.

Key Features

The following features show students the dynamic nature of Sociology:

- **Sociological Research:** Highlights specific current and relevant research studies. Examples include “Is Music a Cultural Universal?” and “Deceptive Divorce Rates.”
- **Sociology in the Real World:** Ties chapter content to student life and discusses sociology in terms of the everyday. Topics include “Secrets of the McJob” and “Grade Inflation: When Is an A Really a C?”
- **Big Picture:** Features present sociological concepts at a national or international level, including “Education in Afghanistan” and “American Indian Tribes and Environmental Racism.”
- **Case Study:** Describes real-life people whose experiences relate to chapter content, such as “Catherine Middleton: The Commoner Who Would Be Queen.”
- **Social Policy and Debate:** Discusses political issues that relate to chapter content, such as “The Legalese of Sex and Gender” and “Is the U.S. Bilingual?”

Section Summaries

Section summaries distill the information in each section for both students and instructors down to key, concise points addressed in the section.

Key Terms

Key terms are bold and are followed by a definition in context. Definitions of key terms are also listed in the Glossary, which appears at the end of the module online and at the end of the chapter in print.

Section Quizzes

Section quizzes provide opportunities to apply and test the information students learn throughout each section. Both multiple-choice and short-response questions feature a variety of question types and range of difficulty.

Further Research

This feature helps students further explore the section topic and offers related research topics that could be explored.

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Supplements

Accompanying the main text is an Instructor's PowerPoint (<https://openstaxcollege.org/textbooks/introduction-to-sociology>) file, which includes all of the images and captions found throughout the text and an Instructor's test bank.

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1 An Introduction to Sociology



Figure 1.1 Sociologists study how society affects people and how people affect society. (Photo courtesy of Chrissy Polcino/flickr)

Learning Objectives

1.1. What Is Sociology?

- Explain concepts central to sociology
- Understand how different sociological perspectives have developed

1.2. The History of Sociology

- Explain why sociology emerged when it did
- Describe how sociology became a separate academic discipline

1.3. Theoretical Perspectives

- Explain what sociological theories are and how they are used
- Understand the similarities and differences between structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism

1.4. Why Study Sociology?

- Explain why it is worthwhile to study sociology
- Identify ways sociology is applied in the real world

Introduction to Sociology

Concerts, sports games, and political rallies can have very large crowds. When you attend one of these events, you may know only the people you came with. Yet you may experience a feeling of connection to the group. You are one of the crowd. You cheer and applaud when everyone else does. You boo and

yell alongside them. You move out of the way when someone needs to get by, and you say "excuse me" when you need to leave. You know how to behave in this kind of crowd.

It can be a very different experience if you are traveling in a foreign country and find yourself in a crowd moving down the street. You may have trouble figuring out what is happening. Is the crowd just the usual morning rush, or is it a political protest of some kind? Perhaps there was some sort of accident or disaster. Is it safe in this crowd, or should you try to extract yourself? How can you find out what is going on? Although you are *in* it, you may not feel like you are *part* of this crowd. You may not know what to do or how to behave.

Even within one type of crowd, different groups exist and different behaviors are on display. At a rock concert, for example, some may enjoy singing along, others prefer to sit and observe, while still others may join in a mosh pit or try crowd surfing. Why do we feel and act differently in different types of social situations? Why might people of a single group exhibit different behaviors in the same situation? Why might people acting similarly not feel connected to others exhibiting the same behavior? These are some of the many questions sociologists ask as they study people and societies.

1.1 What Is Sociology?



Figure 1.2 Sociologists learn about society as a whole while studying one-to-one and group interactions. (Photo courtesy of Robert S. Donovan/flickr)

A dictionary defines **sociology** as the systematic study of society and social interaction. The word “sociology” is derived from the Latin word *socius* (companion) and the Greek word *logos* (study of), meaning “the study of companionship.” While this is a starting point for the discipline, sociology is actually much more complex. It uses many different methods to study a wide range of subject matter and to apply these studies to the real world.

What Are Society and Culture?

Sociologists study all aspects and levels of society. A society is a group of people whose members interact, reside in a definable area, and share a culture. A culture includes the group’s shared practices, values, and beliefs. One sociologist might analyze video of people from different societies as they carry on everyday conversations to study the rules of polite conversation from different world cultures. Another sociologist might interview a representative sample of people to see how texting has changed the way they communicate. Yet another sociologist might study how migration determined the way in which language spread and changed over time. A fourth sociologist might be part of a team developing signs to warn people living thousands of years in the future, and speaking many different languages, to stay away from still-dangerous nuclear waste.

The Sociological Imagination

Although these studies and the methods of carrying them out are different, the sociologists involved in them all have something in common. Each of them looks at society using what pioneer sociologist C. Wright Mills called the sociological imagination, sometimes also referred to as the sociological lens or sociological perspective. Mills defined **sociological imagination** as how individuals understand their own and others’ pasts in relation to history and social structure (1959).

By looking at individuals and societies and how they interact through this lens, sociologists are able to examine what influences behavior, attitudes, and culture. By applying systematic and scientific methods to this process, they try to do so without letting their own biases and pre-conceived ideas influence their conclusions.

Studying Patterns: How Sociologists View Society

All sociologists are interested in the experiences of individuals and how those experiences are shaped by interactions with social groups and society as a whole. To a sociologist, the personal decisions an individual makes do not exist in a vacuum. Cultural patterns and social forces put pressure on people to select one choice over another. Sociologists try to identify these general patterns by examining the behavior of large groups of people living in the same society and experiencing the same societal pressures.

The recent turmoil in the U.S. housing market and the high rate of foreclosures offer an example of how a sociologist might explore social patterns. Owning a home has long been considered an essential part of the American Dream. People often work for years to save for a down payment on what will be the largest investment they ever make. The monthly mortgage is often a person's largest budget item. Missing one or more mortgage payments can result in serious consequences. The lender may foreclose on the mortgage and repossess the property. People may lose their homes and may not be able to borrow money in the future. Walking away from the responsibility to pay debts is not a choice most people make easily.

About three million homes were repossessed in the United States between 2006 and 2011. Experts predict the number could double by 2013 (Levy and Gop 2011). This is a much higher rate than the historical average. What social factors are contributing to this situation, and where might sociologists find patterns? Do Americans view debt, including mortgages, differently than in the past? What role do unemployment rates play? Might a shift in class structure be an influential factor? What about the way major economic players operate?

To answer these questions, sociologists will look beyond individual foreclosures at national trends. They will see that in recent years unemployment has been at record highs. They will observe that many lenders approved subprime mortgages with adjustable rates that started low and ballooned. They may look into whether unemployment and lending practices were different for members of different social classes, races, or genders. By analyzing the impact of these external conditions on individuals' choices, sociologists can better explain why people make the decisions they do.



Figure 1.3 Risky bank loans, falling housing prices, and high unemployment can result in higher foreclosure rates. (Photo courtesy of Jeff Turner/flickr)

Another example of how society influences individual decisions can be seen in people's opinions about and use of food stamps (also known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP benefits). Some people believe that those who receive food stamps are lazy and unmotivated. Statistics from the United States Department of Agriculture show a complex picture.

Table 1.1 Food Stamp Use by State Sociologists examine social conditions in different states to explain differences in the number of people receiving food stamps. (Table courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture)

Percent Eligible by Reason for Eligibility					
	Living in Waiver Area	Have Not Exceeded Time Limits ^a	In E & T Program	Received Exemption	Total Percent Eligible for the FSP ^a
Alabama	29	62 / 72	0	1	73 / 80
Alaska	100	62 / 72	0	0	100
California	6	62 / 72	0	0	64 / 74
District of Columbia	100	62 / 72	0	0	100
Florida	48	62 / 72	0	0	80 / 85
Mississippi	39	62 / 72	0	3	100
Wyoming	7	62 / 72	0	0	64 / 74

The percentage of the population receiving food stamps is much higher in certain states than in others. Does this mean, if the stereotype above were applied, that people in some states are lazier and less motivated than those in other states? Sociologists study the economies in each state—comparing unemployment rates, food, energy costs, and other factors—to explain differences in social issues like this.

To identify social trends, sociologists also study how people use food stamps and how people react to their use. Research has found that for many people from all classes, there is a strong stigma attached to the use of food stamps. This stigma can prevent people who qualify for this type of assistance from using food stamps. According to Hanson and Gundersen (2002), how strongly this stigma is felt is linked to the general economic climate. This illustrates how sociologists observe a pattern in society.

Sociologists identify and study patterns related to all kinds of contemporary social issues. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, the emergence of the Tea Party as a political faction, how Twitter has influenced everyday communication—these are all examples of topics that sociologists might explore.

Studying Part and Whole: How Sociologists View Social Structures

A key basis of the sociological perspective is the concept that the individual and society are inseparable. It is impossible to study one without the other. German sociologist Norbert Elias called the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and the society that shapes that behavior **figuration**. He described it through a metaphor of dancing. There can be no dance without the dancers, but there can be no dancers without the dance. Without the dancers, a dance is just an idea about motions in a choreographer’s head. Without a dance, there is just a group of people moving around a floor. Similarly, there is no society without the individuals that make it up, and there are also no individuals who are not affected by the society in which they live (Elias 1978).

An application that makes this concept understandable is the practice of religion. While people experience their religion in a distinctly individual manner, religion exists in a larger social context. For instance, an individual’s religious practice may be influenced by what government dictates, holidays, teachers, places of worship, rituals, and so on. These influences underscore the important relationship between individual practices of religion and social pressures that influence that religious experience.

Making Connections:

Careers in Sociology



Individual-Society Connections

When sociologist Nathan Kierns spoke to his friend Ashley (a pseudonym) about the move she and her partner had made from an urban center to a small Midwestern town, he was curious how

the social pressures placed on a lesbian couple differed from one community to the other. Ashley said that in the city they had been accustomed to getting looks and hearing comments when she and her partner walked hand in hand. Otherwise, she felt that they were at least being tolerated. There had been little to no outright discrimination.

Things changed when they moved to the small town for her partner's job. For the first time, Ashley found herself experiencing direct discrimination because of her sexual orientation. Some of it was particularly hurtful. Landlords would not rent to them. Ashley, who is a highly trained professional, had a great deal of difficulty finding a new job.

When Nathan asked Ashley if she and her partner became discouraged or bitter about this new situation, Ashley said that rather than letting it get to them, they decided to do something about it. Ashley approached groups at a local college and several churches in the area. Together they decided to form the town's first gay-straight alliance.

The alliance has worked successfully to educate their community about same-sex couples. It also worked to raise awareness about the kinds of discrimination Ashley and her partner experienced in the town and how those could be eliminated. The alliance has become a strong advocacy group, working to attain equal rights for LGBT individuals.

Kierns observed that this is an excellent example of how negative social forces can result in a positive response from individuals to bring about social change (Kierns 2011).

1.2 The History of Sociology



Figure 1.4 People have been thinking like sociologists long before sociology became a separate academic discipline: Plato and Aristotle, Confucius, Khaldun, and Voltaire all set the stage for modern sociology. (Photos (a),(b),(d) courtesy of Wikimedia Commons; Photo (c) courtesy of Moumou82/Wikimedia Commons)

Since ancient times, people have been fascinated by the relationship between individuals and the societies to which they belong. Many of the topics that are central to modern sociological scholarship were studied by ancient philosophers. Many of these earlier thinkers were motivated by their desire to describe an ideal society.

In the 13th century, Ma Tuan-Lin, a Chinese historian, first recognized social dynamics as an underlying component of historical development in his seminal encyclopedia, *General Study of Literary Remains*. The next century saw the emergence of the historian some consider to be the world's first sociologist: Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) of Tunisia. He wrote about many topics of interest today, setting a foundation for both modern sociology and economics, including a theory of social conflict, a comparison of nomadic and sedentary life, a description of political economy, and a study connecting a tribe's social cohesion to its capacity for power (Hannoum 2003).

In the 18th century, Age of Enlightenment philosophers developed general principles that could be used to explain social life. Thinkers such as John Locke, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Hobbes responded to what they saw as social ills by writing on topics that they hoped would lead to social reform.

The early 19th century saw great changes with the Industrial Revolution, increased mobility, and new kinds of employment. It was also a time of great social and political upheaval with the rise of empires that exposed many people—for the first time—to societies and cultures other than their own. Millions of people were moving into cities and many people were turning away from their traditional religious beliefs.

The Father of Sociology



Figure 1.5 Auguste Comte is considered by many to be the father of sociology. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

The term sociology was first coined in 1780 by the French essayist Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) in an unpublished manuscript (Fauré et al. 1999). In 1838, the term was reinvented by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte originally studied to be an engineer, but later became a pupil of social philosopher Claude Henri de Rouvroy Comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). They both thought that society could be studied using the same scientific methods utilized in natural sciences. Comte also believed in the potential of social scientists to work toward the betterment of society. He held that once scholars identified the laws that governed society, sociologists could address problems such as poor education and poverty (Abercrombie et al. 2000).

Comte named the scientific study of social patterns **positivism**. He described his philosophy in a series of books called *The Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842) and *A General View of Positivism* (1848). He believed that using scientific methods to reveal the laws by which societies and individuals interact would usher in a new “positivist” age of history. While the field and its terminology have grown, sociologists still believe in the positive impact of their work.

Karl Marx

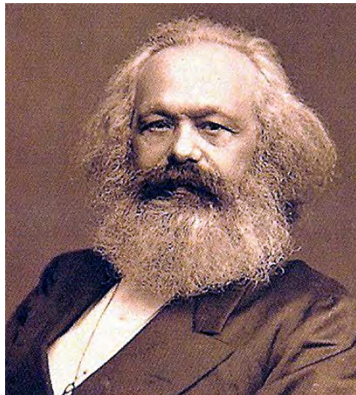


Figure 1.6 Karl Marx was one of the founders of sociology. His ideas about social conflict are still relevant today. (Photo courtesy of John Mayall/Wikimedia Commons)

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German philosopher and economist. In 1848 he and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) coauthored the *Communist Manifesto*. This book is one of the most influential political manuscripts in history. It also presents Marx's theory of society, which differed from what Comte proposed.

Marx rejected Comte's positivism. He believed that societies grew and changed as a result of the struggles of different social classes over the means of production. At the time he was developing his theories, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism led to great disparities in wealth between the owners of the factories and workers. Capitalism, an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of goods and the means to produce them, grew in many nations.

Marx predicted that inequalities of capitalism would become so extreme that workers would eventually revolt. This would lead to the collapse of capitalism, which would be replaced by communism. Communism is an economic system under which there is no private or corporate

ownership: everything is owned communally and distributed as needed. Marx believed that communism was a more equitable system than capitalism.

While his economic predictions may not have come true in the time frame he predicted, Marx's idea that social conflict leads to change in society is still one of the major theories used in modern sociology.

Creating a Discipline

In 1873, the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) published *The Study of Sociology*, the first book with the term “sociology” in the title. Spencer rejected much of Comte's philosophy as well as Marx's theory of class struggle and his support of communism. Instead, he favored a form of government that allowed market forces to control capitalism. His work influenced many early sociologists including Émile Durkheim (1858–1917).

Durkheim helped establish sociology as a formal academic discipline by establishing the first European department of sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1895 and by publishing his *Rules of the Sociological Method* in 1895. In another important work, *Division of Labour in Society* (1893), Durkheim laid out his theory on how societies transformed from a primitive state into a capitalist, industrial society. According to Durkheim, people rise to their proper level in society based on merit.

Durkheim believed that sociologists could study objective “social facts” (Poggi 2000). He also believed that through such studies it would be possible to determine if a society was “healthy” or “pathological.” He saw healthy societies as stable, while pathological societies experienced a breakdown in social norms between individuals and society.

In 1897, Durkheim attempted to demonstrate the effectiveness of his rules of social research when he published a work titled *Suicide*. Durkheim examined suicide statistics in different police districts to research differences between Catholic and Protestant communities. He attributed the differences to *socioreligious* forces rather than to individual or psychological causes.

Prominent sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) established a sociology department in Germany at the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich in 1919. Weber wrote on many topics related to sociology including political change in Russia and social forces that affect factory workers. He is known best for his 1904 book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The theory that Weber sets forth in this book is still controversial. Some believe that Weber was arguing that the beliefs of many Protestants, especially Calvinists, led to the creation of capitalism. Others interpret it as simply claiming that the ideologies of capitalism and Protestantism are complementary.

Weber also made a major contribution to the methodology of sociological research. Along with other researchers such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), Weber believed that it was difficult if not impossible to use standard scientific methods to accurately predict the behavior of groups as people hoped to do. They argued that the influence of culture on human behavior had to be taken into account. This even applied to the researchers themselves, who, they believed, should be aware of how their own cultural biases could influence their research. To deal with this problem, Weber and Dilthey introduced the concept of *verstehen*, a German word that means to understand in a deep way. In seeking *verstehen*, outside observers of a social world—an entire culture or a small setting—attempt to understand it from an insider's point of view.

In his book *The Nature of Social Action* (1922), Weber described sociology as striving to “interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which action proceeds and the effects it produces.” He and other like-minded sociologists proposed a philosophy of **antipositivism** whereby social researchers would strive for subjectivity as they worked to represent social processes, cultural norms, and societal values. This approach led to some research methods whose aim was not to generalize or predict (traditional in science), but to systematically gain an in-depth understanding of social worlds.

The different approaches to research based on positivism or antipositivism are often considered the foundation for the differences found today between quantitative sociology and qualitative sociology. **Quantitative sociology** uses statistical methods such as surveys with large numbers of participants. Researchers analyze data using statistical techniques to see if they can uncover patterns of human behavior. **Qualitative sociology** seeks to understand human behavior by learning about it through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and analysis of content sources (like books, magazines, journals, and popular media).

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