

networks

There's More Online!

- CARTOON** Group Versus Individual Behavior
- CHART** Sociology and the Social Sciences
- IMAGE** Sociological Imagination
- MAP** Population Change
- SELF-CHECK QUIZ**



LESSON 1

The Sociological Perspective

ESSENTIAL QUESTION • *What is sociology?*

Reading HELPDESK



Academic Vocabulary

- **perspective**
- **conformity**

Content Vocabulary

- **sociology**
- **social structure**
- **sociological perspective**
- **sociological imagination**

TAKING NOTES:

Key Ideas and Details

SUMMARIZING As you read about the field of sociology, use a graphic organizer like the one below to record details.

The Nature of Sociology

Sociology and the Study of Human Behavior

Sociology and Social Sciences

Sociological Imagination

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Sociology is the study of human social behavior. It assumes a group perspective rather than an individual perspective. Sociologists look for patterns in social relationships. Individuals can benefit by using their sociological imagination to look at events in their lives.

The Nature of Sociology

GUIDING QUESTION *What is the sociological perspective?*

As a newcomer to the field, you may view sociology as the study of human behavior. As you go along, however, you will acquire a more precise understanding of **sociology** as the scientific study of **social structure**. **Social structure** refers to the patterned ways in which people interact in social relationships. This focus on patterns rather than individual actions is part of the unique perspective of sociology.

A **perspective** is a particular point of view. Babies are usually brighter and better looking to their parents than they are to others. Newlyweds nearly always find their spouses much more attractive than their friends do. We all see what is happening around us through our own perspectives—our own points of view. We normally do not realize how much of our attitudes and beliefs are determined by our perspectives. Sociology looks beyond personal perspectives, however, and is interested in exposing the causes and sources of human behavior. This is known as the debunking tendency.

Sociology and the Study of Human Behavior

Sociologists, like psychologists, examine human behavior. Psychologists and sociologists, however, approach the study of human behavior from different perspectives. Whereas psychologists might be interested in the particular actions of particular individuals, sociologists never focus on the individual. The **sociological perspective** focuses on the social, or group, level. Sociologists are interested in the patterns of behavior shared by members of a group or society. They want to understand how individuals are influenced by the society and culture in which they live. They are also interested in how people's actions and beliefs help change society and culture over time.

Sociology and the Social Sciences

Social science is a branch of learning that deals with human society. It includes a number of disciplines, which we generally refer to as the social sciences. These disciplines differ, but they share enough in common to overlap. Descriptions of the major social sciences are presented in this table.

Sociology investigates human social behavior from a group rather than an individual perspective. It concentrates on patterns of social relationships, primarily in modern societies.

Social Science	Description	Contrasted With Sociology
Anthropology	Anthropology investigates culture, the customary beliefs and material traits of groups. It is the social science most closely related to sociology.	Anthropologists concentrate on the study of preliterate societies (societies that do not use writing). Sociologists focus on modern, industrial societies. When anthropologists and sociologists study the same group, anthropologists place more emphasis on artifacts (what people make), language, and kinship than sociologists do.
Economics	Economics is the study of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.	Economists focus on a single part of society—the economy. Sociologists explore all parts. However, economists and sociologists share an interest in how and why people and groups make certain economic decisions.
History	History is the written record of the human past. Historians collect evidence by analyzing artifacts created during the time period being studied. These artifacts include physical objects, oral reports, and written reports and documents. Historians develop historical accounts by synthesizing and interpreting the evidence they collect.	Methodology—how historians conduct research—is one of the things that sets history apart from sociology. Unlike historians, sociologists use a wide range of research methods in addition to examining physical objects, newspapers, historical documents, and oral histories, including observation, interviews, and questionnaires.
Human Geography	Human geography examines the interaction between human populations and the places in which they live.	Human geography and human ecology in sociology share many interests. Both focus on the geographic basis of human society. Topics such as migration and economic activities are of interest to both fields.
Political Science	Political science investigates the organization, administration, history, and theory of government. For example, political scientists are concerned with voting patterns and participation in political parties.	Sociologists and political scientists share an interest in the structure of government, voting patterns, and political power. But like economists, political scientists concentrate on a single part of society—the government. Government is only one of the parts of society studied by sociologists.
Psychology	Psychology investigates human mental and emotional processes. Psychologists study the development and functioning of the individual.	Sociologists and psychologists are interested in how people adjust to the difficulties they face. Psychologists, however, tend to focus on the individual and what goes on inside people, such as emotions, decision making, and perception. Sociologists are more interested in the social forces that affect people.

► CRITICAL THINKING

1. Contrasting How might a sociologist and an anthropologist differ in their approaches to studying a religious sect?

2. Drawing Conclusions What conclusion can you draw about the scope of sociological inquiry from this chart?

sociology the scientific study of social structure; patterned social behavior

social structure the patterned interaction of people in social relationships

perspective a particular point of view

sociological perspective a view that looks at the behavior of groups, not individuals

Individual Versus Societal Problems

The person on the street might explain human behavior in individualistic or personal terms—a young man joins a gang to prove his toughness; a toddler cries inconsolably when her parents leave her with a babysitter; a factory worker loses his job when his company moves the production plant overseas; a teen commits suicide to escape depression. These are individual problems—what American sociologist C. Wright Mills called “personal troubles.” They affect a particular person and the people in their immediate lives. These are private matters. Sociologists look at societal problems—at what Mills called “the public issues of social structure.” Public issues deal with things that affect groups within society or society as a whole.

Sociologists do not focus on the behavior of individuals but on the patterns of behavior shared by members of a group or society. Sociologists attempt to explain these same events *without* relying on personal factors. They attempt to explain what factors lead to social problems and issues such as delinquency, child development, unemployment, or suicide. Sociologists might explain the events discussed above in the following ways:

- Young men join gangs because they have been taught by their society to be “masculine.”
- It is normal for young children to go through a period of separation anxiety as they are introduced to new people and groups outside the family as part of the socialization process.
- Blue-collar jobs are lost as the United States moves from an industrial to a postindustrial society.
- Teens commit suicide because of peer group expectations of performance, material possessions, and physical appearance.

Sociologists do not speak of *a* young man, *a* toddler, *a* factory worker, or *a* teenager. They concentrate on *categories* of people—young men, toddlers, factory workers, and teenagers. Peter Berger referred to this aspect of the sociological perspective as seeing “the general in the particular.” Sociologists look for general social patterns in the behavior of particular individuals.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Analyzing What makes the sociological perspective unique?

CARTOON >

GROUP VERSUS INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

People often act one way in groups and another way when alone.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Analyzing How does the cartoon illustrate how group behavior can differ from individual behavior?

2. Making Connections How do you think this man's coworkers would react if they were told he is unhappy? Why?



The Importance of Patterns

GUIDING QUESTION *How do group behavior and individual behavior differ?*

As you know well, high school students in a classroom behave in different ways. Some students listen to everything their teacher says. Some tune in and out, and others spend much of the time daydreaming. Yet, if you visit almost any high school, you will find *patterned* relationships. Teachers walk around the room, work with students, lecture, and give tests. Students follow the teacher's lesson plan, make notes, and take tests. Although the personal characteristics of students and teachers may vary from school to school, students and teachers relate in similar patterned ways. It is the patterned interaction of people in social relationships—what sociologists call social structure—that captures the attention of sociologists.

Group Versus Individual Behavior

Sociologists assume that social relationships are not determined only by the particular characteristics of the people involved. Émile Durkheim, a pioneering nineteenth-century sociologist, helped develop the sociological perspective. He argued, for example, that we do not attempt to explain bronze in terms of its separate parts (lead, copper, and tin). Instead, we consider bronze a totally new metal created by the combination of several other metals. We cannot even predict the characteristics of bronze from the traits of its parts. Bronze is hard, while lead, copper, and tin are soft and pliable. The mixing of the individual parts creates a new whole with new characteristics. Durkheim reasoned that a similar process happens with groups of people. For Durkheim, groups are not simply a collection of individuals. They are separate from the individuals who form them.

Indeed, people's behavior within a group setting cannot be predicted from their personal characteristics. Something new is created when individuals come together. For example, in 2005 the New England Patriots won the Super Bowl championship. Following the game, a few otherwise law-abiding football fans, as a group, disrupted the peace and challenged the police in ways they would not have done as individuals.

Tragedy, as well as joy, can change group behavior. An example of this occurred in 2005 when the destructive forces of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent breaching of the levees devastated the city of New Orleans. Large portions of the city were flooded, and many families lost everything they had. In the days following the hurricane, when help was slow in coming, some survivors turned to looting, violence, and other criminal activities, which became serious problems for law enforcement officials. Many of the looting incidents involved normally law-abiding residents gathering food, water, and other essential goods from unattended grocery stores in New Orleans.

Conforming to the Group

Groups range in size from two people to an entire society. Regardless of size, all groups encourage **conformity**. We will study conformity in more detail later. For now, you need to know only that members of a group think, feel, and behave in similar ways. For instance, Americans, Russians, and Nigerians have eating habits, dress, religious beliefs, and attitudes toward family life that reflect their groups.



Sociologists focus on patterns of behavior.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Predicting Based on normal patterns of behavior at a carnival, what do you think the boy might do?

conformity behavior that matches group expectations

A NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

Virginia colonists had offered to “properly educate” some young Native American boys at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg. To the surprise of the colonists, the benefits of a white gentleman’s education were not highly valued by the Native American elders. Canasatego, an Iroquois chief, offered the Native American perspective in a speech to the colonists in 1744. Benjamin Franklin printed the speech below in an essay on Native Americans.

PRIMARY SOURCE

“We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in [your] colleges . . . and we thank you heartily. But you, who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some experience of it; several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the northern provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, nor kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counselors; they were totally good for nothing.

We are, however, not the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.”

—Canasatego, quoted in *Memoirs of Benjamin Franklin*, 1839



Hunting was an essential skill for Native Americans. An education at the College of William and Mary would not develop this expertise.

DBQ ► CRITICAL THINKING

- 1. Making Connections** How does Canasatego’s explanation illustrate the importance of perspective in interpreting the social world?
- 2. Supporting Perspectives** Describe a social encounter in which you personally experienced a “clash of perspectives” with someone from another culture.

Conformity within a group occurs, in part, because members have been taught to value the group’s ways. Members generally tend to conform even when their personal preferences are not the same as the group’s. Teens who start smoking only to gain group acceptance are an example of conformity. Fashion trends depend on conformity to take hold and play out.

Behavior within a group cannot be predicted simply from knowledge about its individual members. Everyone in a group might conform. Yet they might be conforming for different reasons. Some people might truly value their group’s ways. Others might conform only after giving in to social pressures. Like bronze, the group is more than the sum of its parts.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Contrasting Why might an individual’s behavior be different in a group than it might be if the person were acting alone?

Acquiring the Sociological Imagination

GUIDING QUESTION *What is gained by using the sociological imagination?*

The sociological perspective enables us to understand how social forces affect our lives. Understanding this connection can prevent us from being prisoners of those forces. C. Wright Mills called this personal use of sociology the **sociological imagination**—the ability of individuals to see the relationship between events in their personal lives and events in their society.

An important part of developing the sociological imagination is being able to look at our own society as outsiders. Viewing society in this way allows us to escape our personal perspectives and cultural beliefs and see that the problems people face reflect larger social forces and trends. Developing a sociological imagination also helps us appreciate cultural differences. By setting aside our own experiences and beliefs, we are able to understand that what one culture views as unusual might seem quite normal in another culture.

sociological imagination
the ability to see the link between society and self

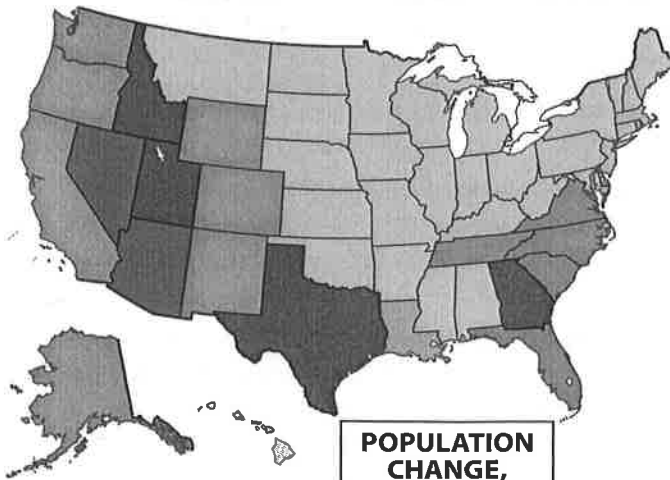
Using Your Sociological Imagination

People do not make decisions, big or small, in isolation. Historically, American society has shown a strong bias against childless and one-child marriages. Couples without children have been considered selfish, and an only child has often been labeled “spoiled.” These values date back to a time when large families were needed for survival. Most people lived on family farms, where children were needed to help with the work. Furthermore, many children died at birth or in infancy. People responded to society’s needs by having large families. Now, as the need for large families is disappearing, we are beginning to read about benefits of one-child families—to the child, to the family, and to society. This change in attitude is reflected in the decrease in family size.

A Diverse America

POPULATION CHANGE

The population of the United States increased by 9.7 percent between 2000 and 2010, rising from 281.4 million to 308.7 million people. During this time period, the South and the West grew at a much faster rate than the Midwest and the Northeast. In fact, 84.4 percent of the nation’s growth occurred in these two regions. Nevada grew at the fastest rate, followed by Arizona, Utah, Idaho, and Texas. This map shows the change in population that occurred over the decade.



Geography Connection

- 1. Places and Regions** Which states had the greatest change in population? Which states experienced the least change?
- 2. Places and Regions** Which regions of the country appear to have experienced the least amount of growth over the last decade?
- 3. Environment and Society** How might you use your sociological imagination to explain why the West and the South experienced the greatest increase in population?

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Distribution and Change: 2000 to 2010

Applying Sociology

CAREERS IN SOCIOLOGY

In general, all employers are interested in four types of skills regardless of what specific career path you choose to pursue. These skills are:

- the ability to work with others.
- the ability to solve problems.
- the ability to write and speak well.
- the ability to analyze information.

Because computers have revolutionized office and business communication, for example, the ability to analyze and evaluate information from a variety of sources has become more important to managers in all types of organizations. The greater complexity of work demands strong critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Knowledge is of limited use if you cannot clearly convey what you know to others.

The study of sociology helps students develop these skills, so it is a solid career base for many career paths. For sociology majors, the following list of possibilities is only the beginning—many other paths are open to you.

- **Social services**—rehabilitation, case management, group work with youths or the elderly, child care or recreation programs, or administration
- **Community work**—fund-raising for social service organizations, community development associations, not-for-profit organizations, child-care programs, or environmental groups; research for local governmental or charitable organizations; program coordination; volunteer recruitment and training
- **Corrections**—local, state, and federal law enforcement, probation, parole, or other criminal justice work
- **Business**—advertising, marketing and consumer research and analysis, brand planning, public relations, banking and finance, communications media, law, insurance, real estate, training, or sales
- **Human resources**—human resources administration, affirmative action coordination, benefits management and analysis, employee recruitment and retention programs, and employee training
- **College settings**—admissions, alumni relations, leadership programs, academic advising, or placement offices
- **Health services**—substance abuse treatment programs, rehabilitation counseling, health planning, family planning, counseling, hospital admissions, health care policy research, and insurance companies
- **Publishing, journalism, and public relations**—writing, research, and editing
- **Government services**—federal, state, and local government jobs in areas such as planning, public archives and libraries, military service, international relations, transportation, housing, agriculture, and labor
- **Teaching**—elementary and secondary schools—in conjunction with appropriate teacher certification, adult education, government education agencies; also in community colleges and universities, with research opportunities.



A sociology major might find a career helping the homeless.

► CRITICAL THINKING

- 1. Evaluating** Evaluate your capabilities in the four skill areas.
- 2. Analyzing** Select a job that you might qualify for with a sociology degree and explain why sociology is a good preparation.

The sociological imagination helps us understand the effects of events, such as the social pressures just discussed, on our daily lives. In C. Wright Mills' words, it helps us "grasp the connection between history and biography." With this understanding, we are in a better position to make our own decisions rather than merely conform.

The Promise of the Sociological Imagination

Mills viewed the sociological imagination as more than just a concept or theory. He saw it as a "promise" that allows people to understand their places in society and history. This social awareness permits us to read the newspaper with a fuller understanding of the events. Instead of interpreting a letter opposing welfare as an expression of someone with no compassion, we might instead see the writer as a person who places great importance on independence and self-help. The sociological imagination questions common interpretations of human social behavior. It challenges conventional social wisdom—ideas people assume are true.

According to Mills, keeping the promise of the sociological imagination is at the heart of all good social analysis. Those who are imaginatively aware consistently ask three sets of questions that help uncover the connection between history and biography:

1. What is the structure of the society as a whole? What parts of the society are essential and how are the parts related? How is the society different from other social orders? How do the parts contribute to continuity and change?
2. Where does the society fit into human history? How is the society changing? What effect is it having on the development of humanity as a whole? How do the society's individual features and the historical time period affect each other? How is the time period different from other periods in history?
3. What are the characteristics of the people who live in the society? How are they shaped by the society? What kinds of "human nature" are revealed by studying the society?

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Assessing How can using your sociological imagination help you in everyday life?



This Mexican migrant farmworker stands outside his shack during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

CRITICAL THINKING

Drawing Conclusions How could using your sociological imagination help you better understand this photograph?

LESSON 1 REVIEW



Reviewing Vocabulary

1. **Specifying** How is a sociological perspective different from the perspective used by psychologists?
2. **Determining Importance** Why are patterns important to sociology?

Using Your Notes

3. **Summarizing** Use your notes to write a statement summarizing why using your sociological imagination is an example of using a sociological perspective.

Answering the Guiding Questions

4. **Identifying Perspectives** What is the sociological perspective?
5. **Evaluating** How do group behavior and individual behavior differ?
6. **Identifying Central Issues** What is gained by using the sociological imagination?

Writing Activity

7. **Informative/Explanatory** Choose a social issue that interests you. Briefly describe the issue. Then explain how using your sociological imagination can help you analyze the issue.