

## Culture and Social Structure

**The Perspective of Sociology**

*Studying sociology can help you gain a new perspective on, or view of, yourself and the world around you. The following excerpt is from the book *The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice and Promise*. In it, the book's author, Dr. Allan G. Johnson, gives an account of why sociology matters and provides examples in our daily life to make a connection with sociology.*

I practice sociology in many ways. I practice it when I think about how social life works, when I write, when I work with people trying to see what's going on in the world and our lives in it. I practice as a consultant in corporations to help solve the dilemmas of a diverse and difficult world in which race, gender, sexual orientation, and other issues of difference cast dark shadows over people's lives. I practice when I walk down a street, shop in a market, or sit in a sidewalk restaurant, sip a cup of coffee, and watch the world go by and wonder what life *really* is all about, what this stream of interconnected people's lives consists of, what knits it all together and what tears it apart, and what, as my students would say, it's got to do with me.

I practice sociology for many reasons. I practice it because there is so much unnecessary suffering in the world, and to do something about it we need to understand where it comes from. In this sense, practicing sociology has a profoundly moral dimension. I don't mean this in the sense that it's about being good instead of bad. I mean it in a deeper and broader sense of morality that touches on the essence of what we're about as human beings and what our life together consists of. It is impossible to study social life for very long without coming up against the consequences that social life produces, and a lot of these consequences do such damage to people's lives that, unless we find ways to deny or ignore the reality of it, we feel compelled to ask "why?" And once we ask that question, we need tools to help make sense of where it leads and to imagine how we might go from these toward something better. We can't help but be part of the problem; practicing sociology is a way to also be part of the solution. This not only helps the world, but makes it easier to live in, especially given how crazy a place it can seem. It helps to be able to see how one thing is connected to another, and, in that, how to find ways to make some small difference. We can't change the world all by ourselves, but we can make informed decisions about how to participate in it, and how that can help turn the world toward something better, even if it's just in our neighborhoods or families or where we work.

I wouldn't do all this if I didn't believe something better was possible, so I have to add faith to my list of reasons for practicing sociology. I believe the choices we make as individuals matter beyond our lives more than we can imagine, that things don't have to be the way they are, but that they won't get better all by themselves. We need to do something, and what we do

**Chapter 1, Reading, continued**

needs to be based on more than hunches and personal opinions and prejudice. We need systematic ways to figure things out, and that's what sociological practice offers.

I also practice sociology because it helps to keep me in touch with the essence of my own life in the world, for sociology isn't simply about some larger world "out there." It's also about us in the world and the connection between the two which means it can take us toward basic truths about who we are and what our lives are about. I practice it because it reminds me that for all that we think we know about things, beneath that is all we don't know, which is good reason to feel awed from time to time. On some level, for example, I'm amazed that social life works together as much as we do, to talk, dream, imagine, fight, and create. There is something miraculous about the simplest conversation—miraculous in the sense that there is a core truth about how it happens that we can never get to. We can contemplate the miracle of things by taking ourselves toward the limit of what we can know. And we can feel the fringe of core truths and how our lives are part of them. So, while my practice is usually "about" understanding the world, it is also about keeping myself in touch with the essentially unknowable essence of human existence that lies beneath.

Practicing sociology is a way to observe the world and to think about and make sense of it. It is a way to be in the world and *of* the world, to play a meaningful role in the life of our species as it shapes and reshapes itself into the mystery of what's going on and what it's got to do with us.

From *The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice and Promise* by Allan G. Johnson.  
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**UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space below.

1. According to Allan Johnson, what does sociological practice offer? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What does Johnson say we must do before we can eliminate the unnecessary suffering in the world?

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**ACTIVITY** Imagine you are a sociologist practicing sociology. Walk down the street or sit in a restaurant and observe the world around you. Take notes on the people you see, including whether they are alone or with one or more people, as well as their behaviors and how (if) they are communicating with others. Notice sources of mass media such as posters and signs, the clothing worn by the people you see (T-shirts, tennis shoes, handbags, and backpacks), broadcast messages, music, or newspaper headlines. Discuss your observations with the class.