

Chapter 1 – A Sociological Compass

1. LEARNING OUTCOMES (WITH BLOOM'S TAXONOMY)

After completing this chapter, students should be able to:

- **Define** the discipline of sociology.
- **Identify** the patterns of social relations that surround, permeate and influence the individual.
- **Explain** the ways in which sociological research is motivated simultaneously by the desire to improve people's lives and to test the validity of ideas by way of the scientific method.
- **Discuss** the primary schools of thought within the field of sociology.
- **Describe** why sociology was a product of the scientific, democratic, and industrial revolutions.
- **Explain** the critical challenges societies face today.

2. WHY IS THIS CHAPTER IMPORTANT TO SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS?

This chapter presents an important opportunity for students to gain their first glimpse into what is unique and powerful about the sociological perspective: namely, the ability to peel back the surface of everyday social phenomena or common-sense assumptions and reveal the patterned social relations that are at work. At the same time, this chapter is a crucial introduction to the interrelationship between concrete observations and the theoretical frameworks that sociologists use to guide and inform those observations.

This chapter is also important because it sketches out the historical context within which sociology emerged, and stresses that sociologists have never approached their field of study dispassionately, but instead with a determined interest in improving the social world.

In the midst of an era characterized by rapid and complex social changes as well as an uncertain future, sociology can also play an important role in helping students to orient themselves between “biography and history” (p. 11), and to develop a nuanced understanding of the challenges facing societies worldwide.

3. WHY SHOULD STUDENTS CARE?

Understanding the connections and interconnections between individual experiences and actions, in conjunction with the social structural and historical forces is a central objective of sociological study. It is also what makes sociology a potentially exciting subject for students. Furthermore, cultivating a “sociological imagination” will enable students to have a better comprehension of their own lives, their society, and the events that are happening in societies around the world. Armed with this understanding, students will have the ability to make better-informed life choices.

Sociology also presents students with the challenge and the opportunity of discovering the world of divergent thinking. Within an “instruction paradigm of education” (Barr and Tagg, 1995), students have been conditioned to believe that learning is focused on knowledge acquisition and that all problems have a “right answer.” It is important that they develop their ability to think critically and creatively, utilizing both deductive and inductive reasoning, while going beyond linear and convergent thinking to divergent and lateral thinking. The development and promotion of these cognitive skills and abilities can be readily addressed in a sociology course. Furthermore, these critical thinking skills are “marketable” and in demand by employers, since they more accurately reflect the types of performances required in the real world.

4. WHAT ARE COMMON STUDENT MISCONCEPTIONS & STUMBLING BLOCKS?

Students are typical of most people in having a *de facto* voluntaristic and individualistic perspective on life. The tendency is to believe that one’s life is strictly an outcome of personal choices and decisions and, as a result, they may struggle with seeing how embedded they are in a social and cultural context. (pp. 8–12).

Students may lack an appreciation of the degree to which our taken-for-granted sense of social reality is not “natural,” but instead the outcome of diverse and complex historical events, including the Scientific Revolution, the Democratic Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. The challenge is to convey the historical context in a manner that reveals how apparently linear and separate events are interconnected and are part of a cohesive whole. Ideally, students will come to see “how history made science” AND “how science made history”—and that life is not linear, it is organic (pp. 12–14).

A sociological imagination requires an ability to think divergently and creatively, and this skill may be underdeveloped in students, likely due to previous educational experiences (Robinson, 2010). The adoption of a sociological perspective and development of the sociological imagination needs to be demonstrated, utilized, and practised on a continuous/ongoing basis (pp. 10–12).

5. WHAT CAN I DO IN CLASS?

At the start of class:

“Optical Illusions”: (e.g., “musician/girl’s face” and others: <http://www.optillusions.com>)

Ask students, “What is this a picture of?” As students reply, depending on which one they readily see, it becomes apparent that “one” reality (the picture) has embedded within it “two” pictures (realities)—the musician AND a girl’s face. Moreover, what you see is predicated on where you focus when viewing the reality. Likewise, the theoretical traditions—the main focus on “values” for functionalists, “class inequality” for conflict theorists, “meaning” for symbolic interactionists, and “patriarchy” for feminist theory. Each group is trying to understand and explain societal problems with one focus, but reality cannot be confined to, totally explained by, or understood with one “point of view.”

“Rocks and Fire”: Bring to class a piece of rock, and a board or old book to drop it on from waist height. Ask if a student can loan you his or her cigarette lighter. Then, ask students to imagine what their understanding of natural phenomena would be if they lived in the medieval era, before the Scientific Revolution. Drop the rock to the floor and ask, “Why does it fall down?” Solicit responses. Tell them that, within a pre-scientific consciousness, one’s understanding would be that rocks are of the earth, and choose to return to it if released from one’s grasp. Then, flick the cigarette lighter and ask, “Why does the flame go up?” The medieval explanation of flame was that, as flames are of the same essence as the stars and heavenly bodies, they express that by going up. The point of both demonstrations is that, fanciful as these understandings were, they were perfectly acceptable in their historical context, and that *any* explanation of phenomena relies on a conceptual framework. This demonstration also ties in neatly with the Great Chain of Being (p. 14), which depicts an animated nature and one in which tradition is the answer to questions about hierarchical relationships. The historical context is explained clearly by Berman (1981): see <http://physics.sfsu.edu/~wcaudy/340readings/BermanReenchantmentoftheWorld1.pdf>.

Mini quiz: (on the assigned chapter/reading for this class session) Begin with five multiple-choice questions for students to answer. In addition to getting the class to settle down and focus, it highlights your expectation that the readings are to be done “before class.” This also gives the students a familiarity with what types of questions they may see on their exam(s).

Throughout the class:

“Chunk” the lecture into 10- to 15-minute presentations of information: (Davis, 1993; Sousa, 2006; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011) At the end of each segment, stop and focus on actively involving students.

Think/Pair/Share: Stop the lecture at a convenient point and display an abbreviated list of your last 3–5 main points. Ask students to pair up and choose a main point from the list to discuss and summarize. After 3 minutes, solicit results from volunteers. [Understand]

Interrogate the text graphs/figures: Pose questions and ask students to discuss, interpret, and/or make predictions:

Figure 1.1 (page 6): Map of Suicide Rates—Why the difference in rates between Russia, North America, and Mexico/majority of South America? What social, political, economic, and/or cultural factors could have impacted these figures? [Apply/Analyze]

Figure 1.2 (page 6): Durkheim’s Theory of Suicide—How much social solidarity should be encouraged (should we aim at creating) in a society, if we want to minimize suicide rates? (*The lowest being found at the middle—it is a balance between not enough and too much.*) How might we accomplish this? (*Or have we already accomplished this in Canada?*) [Apply/Analyze/ Evaluate/Create]

Figure 1.3 (page 7): Suicide Rates by Age and Sex, Canada, 2011—How can we understand and explain these suicide rates? (i.e., *males tend to use more lethal methods, which leads to more “completed” suicides versus female suicide “attempts”/the different life stages and the degree of integration into society.*) [Understand/Apply]

Class discussion and/or a writing assignment:

News Events: Remote reserve plagued by epidemic of youth suicides. *Jon Thompson, QMI Agency*
First posted: Saturday, September 17, 2011 02:00 AM EDT

“PIKANGIKUM FIRST NATION—A desperate call for help rang out this summer after five youths took their own lives on this northwestern Ontario reserve.

Unfortunately, it came too late for one young man, whose death on Friday was confirmed as Pikangikum First Nation’s sixth suicide within a span of two months....”

(Available at <http://www.torontosun.com/2011/09/16/remote-reserve-plagued-by-epidemic-of-youth-suicides>.) *Important to Note: In the years from 2006–2008, 16 children and youth between the ages of 10–19 killed themselves by hanging in the Pikangikum First Nation.* In light of Durkheim’s findings, what are some of the possible reasons behind the extraordinarily high suicide rate amongst Aboriginal youth? [Understand/Apply/Analyze/Evaluate/Create]

Small group discussion: Divide the class into 4 groups of equal size (maximum 6–8 students per group), and assign one of the four sociological paradigms to each group. Then, have the class vote on a specific sociological phenomenon from a short list you give them. Each group will analyze the phenomenon from its chosen perspective and present its results. A good resource for this exercise is a table on which students can fill in their ideas, as well as those from other groups. [Apply/Analyze]

Three-minute essay: Ask students to choose between the Scientific Revolution, the Democratic Revolution, or the Industrial Revolution. Then, ask each to write one paragraph explaining how his or her choice contributed to the development of sociology. When the time is up, solicit student responses to be read out and discussed. [Remember/Understand]

Class discussion and/or a reflection paper writing assignment:

Levels of analysis: 1. Biography [Individual/Agency]
2. Milieu [Home/Community/Sense of Belonging]
3. History [Society]

Utilizing the graphic entitled “3 Levels of analysis” (see Instructor’s Manual p. 1-10), work through a “real life example” (i.e., yours) to demonstrate to students how the choices and chances experienced in an individual’s life are deeply embedded within a society. [Remember/Understand/Apply]

Documentary: *The Story of Science: Power, Proof and Passion* (2010 BBC documentary, Episode 1—*What Is Out There?*) “Explores how the evolution of scientific understanding is intimately interwoven with society’s historical path... This is the story of how history made science and how science made history, and how the ideas which emerged made the modern world.” View and discuss the “interconnectedness” of history, science, and the individuals (“players”) and the social forces and events. Playlist of 6–10 minute segments; available at <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/story-of-science/> (Note: not currently available on YouTube.). (Could reduce the length of time with a review of the segments and showing just the material that addresses the key players and events—Tyco/Kepler/Galileo/Roman Catholic Church.) [Remember/Understand/Apply/Analyze]

Video lecture: *Nicholas Christakis: The Sociological Science Behind Social Networks and Social Influence* (2012: 56 minutes). This is an excellent introduction to the sociological perspective, which works well as a whole, but which is also divided into segments that could be interspersed with lecture or seminar content. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wadBvDPeE4E> [Remember/Understand/Apply/Analyze/Evaluate]

6. HOW WILL I KNOW THAT MY STUDENTS HAVE LEARNED THE LOs?

End the class with a mini quiz: Focus on multiple-choice questions that address the Learning Objectives of the chapter. Review and discuss the “correct” answers for each question. (“Clicker” technology and turning point slides are very effective tools for this exercise.)

Think/Pair/Share: Ask students to pair up and read the short essay, “I commit sociology and I don’t intend to stop” (available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/i-commit-sociology-and-i-dont-intend-to-stop/article11667231/>). Each pair then explores the connections they see between the article and the three stated goals of Chapter 1 (pp. 4–5).

Ask students (in pairs/small groups) to create and submit a question (with answer): This question should be one that they would like to be included on an upcoming exam: Some of these questions could be developed into a multiple-choice format and used at the start of the next class as a review of the material from this session. It allows students to engage with the exam creation, and if used as part of the next session’s opening questions, it enables them to self-assess their learning and engagement in the previous session.

Set up an online survey tool account: (i.e., www.toofast.ca) and ask/instruct students to answer one or two questions, such as: What did I learn today that precipitated an “aha” moment? What did I not understand in today’s class? (This provides you with feedback on the teaching in addition to the student learning. The difficulties with understanding could then be addressed in the next class).

MindTap: Refer your students to <http://www.nelson.com/student> to access the **MindTap** for *Sociology: Your Compass for a New World*. MindTap is a personalized program of digital products and services that engages students with interactivity while offering students and instructors choice in content, platforms, devices, and learning tools. This resource includes quiz questions, videos, and articles that are accompanied by thought-provoking questions that challenge students to think critically about current issues and events. Ask students to utilize this learning tool, and bring to the next class any questions (difficulties) they may have in regards to information from this chapter.

7. HOW CAN I ASSESS MY OWN “PERFORMANCE”?

A critical reflection on my own practice: insights and understandings:

- A. Did I get the attention of my students at the beginning of class?
 - a. What did I do? Did it work? How? If not, why not?
 - b. Did I get the right kind of attention, or the wrong kind?

- B. Did I allot enough time for student dialogue/participation/engagement in the learning process?
 - a. If not, why not?
 - b. Is there any material that can (or should) be minimized or removed in order to allow for student input and participation?
 - c. Are there ways of transferring some of the content online to open up more time in class for participation and engagement?

- C. How could I incorporate more student input and participation? (e.g., clicker questions, think/pair/share, one-minute summaries)

- D. Were my students engaged and/or focused?
 - If so:
 - a. What tells me that they were?
 - b. What concepts were we covering?
 - c. What precisely were they engaged with and/or focused on? (i.e., video clip, documentary, debate, small group discussion, whole class discussion)
 - d. Were there unexpected moments of engagement, i.e., in group discussion, that I recognized and incorporated?
 - If not:
 - a. When did I lose them?
 - b. Why did they disengage/lose focus?

- E. Did I integrate formative assessment of student learning throughout the “lecture”?
 - a. What did I do?
 - b. Did these assessments suggest to me that they understood the key concepts? If not, was I prepared to alter my plan in response?

- F. Did I request feedback from the students on their learning experience in this class? i.e.:
 - a. Submission of an “aha” moment they had
 - b. Informal summary (point form) addressing two or three concepts covered
 - c. Five (ten) minutes for “debriefing” at the end (of class or topic)—“*What*” are your questions? (not “Are there any questions?”)

- d. Refer students to an online survey (e.g., Blackboard learning system, toofast.ca).
- G. Some things to consider for the next class (modifications to consider when teaching this chapter again):
- a. What worked really well, and why?
 - b. What could/should/might I do differently next time to improve student engagement and learning?
- H. What did I learn about this topic? What insights did I gather from my students? Were any of those insights surprising to me?
- I. What did I learn about my teaching, and what can I do to modify my teaching as a result?

8. WHAT OTHER RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE? [Supplementary Resources]

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9. QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WITH SUGGESTED ANSWERS

1. What role do *values* play in each of the main sociological theories, and how can values have a place within the science of sociology?

Answers to the first part of the question will vary according to which sociological theory is under examination. However, the overall point is that values play an important role in fundamental assumptions that underpin hypotheses about society, decisions about the formulation of theories, and choices about the subjects of sociological research. As well, the fact that all sociological theories bring with them a tendency toward prescription means that there is an unresolvable tension between *values* and scientific objectivity.

2. What does Durkheim mean by “social solidarity”? How does he apply the term to the study of suicide?

Social solidarity means the integration into a group of people, and the functional interdependence of a group of people, all within the larger social sphere. The group members share beliefs and

values in their interactions. In his study of suicide, Durkheim argued that suicide rates reflect the degree of social integration (levels of social solidarity) the members have in their society.

3. Comparing Canada 100 years ago with Canada today, how and why do you think the level of social solidarity has changed? What accounts for the change? What are some consequences of the change? Has the level of social solidarity changed more for some groups than for others? If so, why, and with what consequences?

Answers will vary and may include comparisons from age groups, gender, social environment, religious groups, and so on. For example: Suicide is more frequent in today's adolescents because of their low integration into society (negative interaction with parents, low income and/or employment opportunities, less association with religion, etc.).

4. Do you think Canadians have more or less freedom and equality of opportunity now than they did 100 years ago? Do you think we will have more or less freedom and equality of opportunity in 100 years than we do today? Justify your argument.

Answers will vary.

