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# 1

## TRAINING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL EYE

Kathleen Odell Korgen

### LEARNING QUESTIONS

- 1.1 What is sociology?
- 1.2 What do the sociological eye and the sociological imagination allow you to do?
- 1.3 What key aspects of sociology make it a social *science*?
- 1.4 How can you tell the difference between a good generalization and a stereotype?
- 1.5 What are the core commitments of sociology?
- 1.6 How can sociology benefit both individuals and society?

Have you ever wanted to know what you can do to improve your chances of landing a desirable job after college? Why college tuition is so expensive? Why the number of hate groups in the United States has reached a record high? Why some groups of people made *more* money than usual during the COVID-19 pandemic? What types of jobs will be most available when you graduate? Why people vote for certain political candidates (or do not vote at all)? How you can make a positive impact on society? If so, you have chosen the right subject! Sociology can help you answer all these questions—and raise some new ones.

## WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

### LEARNING QUESTION

#### 1.1 What is sociology?

So, what is sociology? **Sociology** is the scientific study of society, including how individuals both *shape* and *are shaped by* society. Notice in this definition that people are active beings, shapers of society, but they are also affected by society. It's important to remember that society influences us in myriad ways—how we think, what we notice, what we believe to be true, how we see ourselves, and so on. But it is simultaneously vital to realize that we help shape the society in which we live. This duality is at the heart of sociology and our daily lives—whether we are aware of it or not.



Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head and, later, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work promoting education for girls. Her life helps us see how we both shape and are shaped by our societies.

Nigel Waldron/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

### Shaping and Being Shaped by Society

The life of Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize winner in history, provides an excellent example of this duality. No one can deny that Malala is an extraordinary young woman. Her personal bravery and selflessness are awe-inspiring. Just nine months after she was shot in the head by the Taliban for publicly promoting education for girls in Pakistan, Malala declared in an address to the United Nations Youth Assembly that “one child, one teacher, one book, and one pen, can change the world” (United Nations 2013). Her organization, the Malala Fund, has provided the means for many other girls to gain an education. Clearly, Malala has shown the power of an individual to influence society.

Malala, however, just like the rest of us, is a product of her society. Imagine if, instead of growing up in the Swat Valley of Pakistan during the time of the Taliban, she grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey. Her life would have been very different. She would not have been shot by the Taliban, and she would not have created the Malala Fund. Indeed, the Malala raised in New Jersey may not have even been aware that girls in many areas of the world face violence for going to school. Sociology helps us understand the impact of society on us and how we can work with others, as Malala is doing now, to solve the social issues facing our societies.

## HOW I GOT ACTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY

KATHLEEN ODELL KORGEN

I slept most of the way through the SOC 101 course I took in college. The professor lectured, and we took notes (or not).

That SOC 101 course was the last sociology class I took until I found a sociology graduate program in social justice and social economy that encouraged sociologists to put sociological tools

into action. In that program, I learned that sociology could show me how I can change society. As a researcher, I have worked on issues related to race relations and racial identity, evaluated social justice efforts and sociology programs, and helped create introductory textbooks that get students to *do* sociology as they learn it.

As a sociology teacher, I want students to know—right away—all that sociology offers them—and society. A major part of my work has been to help students use sociological tools to make a positive impact on society. In my classes, from SOC 101 to Public Sociology and Civic Engagement, students don't just learn about sociology—they become sociologists in action.

## The Origins and Current Uses of Sociology

Sociology developed out of the need to understand and address social issues. The roots of sociology are based in efforts to understand and to help control the impact of major societal changes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in Europe and the United States, organized people challenged monarchies and the dominance of religion. The Industrial Revolution dramatically changed where people lived and how they worked. Social change occurred everywhere, and philosophers and scientists offered new answers to life's questions. Many began to believe science could help leaders understand and shape society. Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the French philosopher who gave sociology its name, envisioned that sociology would be the “queen science” that could help steer society safely through great changes.

Today, sociologists help us understand and address challenges like economic inequality, environmental racism, sexism, the social dimensions of global climate change, war, terrorism, and so on. Sociologists work in a variety of settings, including colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations (e.g., environmental groups, public health programs, and community-based organizations), government, marketing, sales, social services, and the human resources departments of businesses and nonprofit organizations. People in every profession benefit from sociological training, and employers value employees with sociological skills.

A survey by LinkedIn reveals that students who study sociology tend to gain precisely the skills employers seek. For example, among the top five “soft” (interpersonal) skills employers seek are creativity, collaboration, persuasion, and emotional intelligence. The top ten hard skills include analytical reasoning, business analysis, affiliate (influencer) marketing, and sales (Pate 2020).

In this course alone, you will have the opportunity to learn *and use* many of these skills. In most sociology undergraduate programs, you can gain and use all of them!

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.1

### HOW CAN SOCIOLOGY BOOST YOUR CAREER?

#### What is sociology?

In this activity, you will consider the ways sociology can be a benefit in any workplace.

No matter what your major or what you intend to do after graduation, sociology can help you. Sociology is useful in any organization and any professional field. Gaining a sociological perspective will enable you to better understand how society, organizations, and groups work; interact effectively with people of different genders, sexual orientations, ages, races, cultures, and economic classes; anticipate the responses of various demographic groups to products and ideas; make and use connections with other people and organizations; and recognize and address issues of inequality and privilege.

Write your answers to the following questions:

1. What is sociology?
2. What career do you plan on pursuing? If you are not sure yet, think of any profession with which you are familiar (e.g., lawyer, marketing director, police officer, entrepreneur, Wall Street banker, environmental activist, social worker, teacher).

3. How can gaining a sociological perspective help you to succeed in that career? Which of the top skills listed as desirable by employers (creativity, collaboration, persuasion, and emotional intelligence; analytical reasoning, business analysis, affiliate [influencer] marketing, and sales) might you use?

### Check Your Understanding

1. What is sociology?
2. What is the duality at the heart of sociology?
3. In what types of settings do sociologists work?

## CHANGING HOW YOU VIEW THE WORLD

### LEARNING QUESTION

- 1.2 What do the sociological eye and the sociological imagination allow you to do?

This sociology course will help you develop your sociological eye and your sociological imagination. Together, they allow you to notice and make sense of social patterns in ways that enable you to understand how society works—and to help influence it. Social patterns vary from society to society and over time based on a society's culture and social structure.

These cultural and structural patterns shape people's experiences and opportunities. The rules, values, beliefs, and material goods created by members of a society form a **culture**, a way of thinking, living, believing, and creating that people learn through interacting with others. A **social structure** is the framework of a society, shaped by its major social institutions (e.g., government, schools, economy, families, and religion) and people's positions (statuses and roles) within those institutions. Social structure provides the foundation for effective social interaction as it constrains us. For example, consider your status (student) and role (the behavior expected of you) in a college class. The social patterns they create both limit your actions and make an environment conducive for learning. Imagine how annoying it would be to attend a class without any structure or rules. How much do you think you would learn in it?

### The Sociological Eye

A **sociological eye** enables you to see what others may not notice. It allows you to peer beneath the surface of a situation and discern cultural and structural social patterns (Collins 1998). For example, there is a woman academic who conducts evaluations of various academic departments every year. Often, she does so as part of a team. She has noticed that whenever she is paired with a man, the clients always look at the man when speaking to them both. As a sociologist, she knows that what she is experiencing is gender bias created and supported by cultural and structural patterns. In general, both men and women tend to defer to men and pay more attention to them, particularly in business settings. This is a cultural pattern that keeps women, in general, at a lower status level than men.

Once you start paying attention to gender patterns (e.g., who talks more in classes or meetings, who interrupts whom) or racial patterns (e.g., who eats lunch with whom in the cafeteria, what student organizations tend to attract specific racial groups, who is more likely to be stopped by the police), you won't be able to stop noticing them. Recognizing these patterns makes you more aware of how your



You can use your sociological eye to notice racial, gender, and social status patterns in the cafeteria scenes in the classic film *Mean Girls*—and in most real-life cafeterias.

A. F. Archive/Alamy

campus and the larger society work. Once you have this awareness, you can then take steps to change these patterns—if you so choose. The woman we referred to earlier, for example, now often prepares herself to talk more (and more authoritatively) when paired with a man and teaches others to make an effort to pay as much attention to women as to men. You will learn more about *why* we tend to pay more attention to men in Chapter 8!

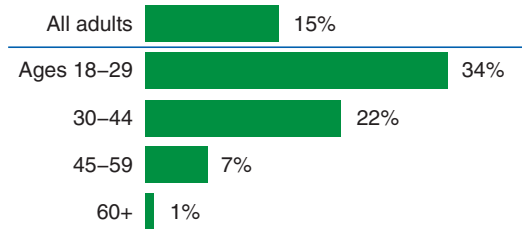
### The Sociological Imagination

Once you develop your sociological eye, you can also expand your **sociological imagination**, the ability to connect what is happening in your own life and in the lives of other individuals to social patterns in the larger society. In doing so, you can differentiate between a personal problem and a social problem that requires a societal solution. For example, you may be having a difficult time paying for college. This is a challenge for many individuals. You may address it by taking out loans (and more loans), working while going to school, transferring to a more affordable school, and so forth. So far, these are all individual responses to the problem of high tuition. Looking at the problem with a sociological eye, however, can help you see that this is not just a hardship for a few individuals but part of a social pattern. Many college students across the United States face the same issue, and to address it effectively, we need to make changes on the societal (structural), rather than just the individual, level.

As Figure 1.1 shows, more than one in three Americans ages 18 to 29 and more than one in five 30- to 44-year-old Americans have student loan debt. The average federal student loan borrower owes \$37,113 (Hanson 2022). That's a lot of debt—and those who go on to attend graduate, medical, or law school tend to end up owing much more. People with tens of thousands of dollars in student loans (or even more!) have great difficulty buying a car, purchasing a house, or maybe even paying rent. This, in turn, hurts the overall economy.

Once you begin to look at the high cost of college as a societal issue, you can investigate its causes. You can then work with other students and families across the nation to press elected officials to develop state and national solutions to this societal problem.

C. Wright Mills (1959:1) developed the concept of the sociological imagination to describe how our individual lives relate to social forces. The sociological imagination gives us the ability to recognize

**FIGURE 1.1** ■ Percentage of Adults with Student Loan Debt, by Age Group

Source: Cilluffo, Anthony. 2019. "5 Facts About Student Loans." Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/13/facts-about-student-loans/>

the relationship between our own biographies and the society in which we live. Mills explained the impact of society on individuals this way:

When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. . . . When wars happen, an insurance salesperson becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar operator; a wife or husband lives alone; a child grows up without a parent. . . . Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Our lives are shaped by the societies in which we live. Yet we can also help shape those societies. If a few thousand people in the United States voted a different way in 2016, Hillary Clinton would have become president instead of Donald Trump. On a more personal level, your experience in this class depends a lot on how your professor chooses to teach it. Your behavior will also influence it. Imagine how different this class will be for everyone if you choose to prepare for each class and actively participate or if you choose to blow off the reading and groan every time one of your classmates says anything. Individuals choose how to behave within their social environments—and those choices affect the environments.

### The Fallacy of the Individualist Perspective

We often forget, however, that our choices are limited. In the United States today, the myth that we, as individuals, determine our own lives permeates society. From this *individualist perspective*, whether we succeed or fail depends primarily on our own efforts. For example, you have probably heard of the saying that in the United States, anyone who works hard enough can “make it.” A sociological eye quickly sees that this individualist perspective is flawed. Some people have fewer hurdles and more opportunities in life than others. For example, take two students with the same level of innate intelligence. Both work hard, but one goes to a school that offers many AP courses, where students are expected and encouraged to apply to selective colleges. The other student goes to a school with few AP courses, where teachers and administrators focus on preventing kids from dropping out of high school rather than on getting them into selective colleges. Chances are the second student may not even be aware of all the schools to which the first student applies. The two students’ chances of “making it” are not the same—no matter how hard they both work.

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.2

### DISTINGUISHING INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

#### What do the sociological eye and the sociological imagination allow you to do?

In this exercise, you will use your sociological eye and sociological imagination to note and determine how to address a social problem.

Think of a social problem common among college students today. Then, answer the following questions:

1. What is the social problem?
2. How do you know this is a social problem, rather than an individual problem?
3. How does your sociological eye and sociological imagination help you identify social problems and potential solutions to these problems?
4. Share your answer with a classmate and, together, choose one of your social problems and explain (1) why and (2) how it should be addressed on a societal, rather than an individual, level.

Be prepared to share your work with your class.

The sociological eye gives us the ability to recognize the impact society has on us and how the individualist perspective works to prevent people from noticing that impact. Having a sociological eye, therefore, gives us advantages over those who cannot yet see societal forces and recognize social patterns. Those blind to the influence of society are unknowingly shaped by it. Those with a sociological eye—and therefore a sociological imagination—recognize the impact society has on them *and* how they can work most effectively to shape society.

### Check Your Understanding

1. What does a sociological eye allow you to do?
2. What makes up the culture and social structure of a society?
3. What can you do with a sociological imagination?

## SOCIOLOGY AS A SOCIAL SCIENCE

### LEARNING QUESTION

- 1.3 What key aspects of sociology make it a social *science*?

Sociology is a social science, a scientific discipline that studies how society works. Other social sciences include human geography, anthropology, political science, and psychology. As we seek to better understand how society operates, sociologists, like all scientists, use theories and the scientific research process to formulate research questions and collect and analyze data.

### Scientific Research

All scientific research involves the pursuit of knowledge through systematic data collection (e.g., experiments, observation), data measurement (describing the data we collect in terms of numbers, words, pictures, or stories), and analysis (explaining what the data indicate). Such research often starts with the desire to understand why a phenomenon occurs (e.g., Why does the sun rise and set? Why do wealthier people tend to live longer?). We often start with an educated guess (hypothesis), and then we collect, measure, and analyze data to test the hypothesis. When scientists present their research to their peers and the public, they provide a careful description of how they derived their findings. This transparency allows other scientists to replicate their research and point out flaws in the original research or confirm its findings. As we make sense of the data we and others gather and analyze, we create, refine, or refute theoretical perspectives and theories (which then lead us to other hypotheses to test). As our findings change, so must the theories we use to understand them.

## Theoretical Perspectives and Theories

Both theoretical perspectives and theories are explanations, carefully derived from the scientific method of research to explain the natural or social world. Theoretical perspectives are paradigms, or ways of viewing the world. They help us make sense of the social patterns we observe, and they determine the questions we ask. In turn, our research findings allow us to test theoretical perspectives and theories and change them as needed. As our findings change, so must the theories we use to understand them.

Each sociological perspective has its own focus and asks different questions about the social world. Some ask questions about social order and cohesion (e.g., How do the various parts of society work together?), some ask questions about problems in society (e.g., Why is there inequality?), and some ask questions about the ways we see ourselves in relation to others (e.g., How do our interactions with others influence how we see ourselves?).

Under the umbrella of each sociological perspective fall individual theories that explain particular aspects of social behavior (e.g., How does family income affect education? Why are there more female teachers but more male principals?). You will learn more about the most important theoretical perspectives sociologists use in Chapter 2 and about topic-specific (middle-range) theories that fall under their respective umbrellas throughout the book.

## The Sociological Scientific Research Process

Sociology is a science because we base our understandings of how society operates in data, analysis, and theories grounded in the scientific research process. Like other scientists, we conduct research in systematic ways that we clearly describe and offer for critique from other social scientists and the general public. Others can replicate our research and support our conclusions or reveal flaws in our data-gathering process and findings. Sometimes people from different demographic groups notice different patterns in the same data. For example, sociologists interested in the lives of college students may focus on different aspects of college life, depending on their gender, race, sexual orientation, or economic and educational backgrounds. Studying the same phenomena from as many different angles as possible allows us to gain a more accurate and scientifically sound understanding of our society.

Sometimes, our findings are unexpected. For example, a sociologist who uses a theoretical lens that focuses on inequality and group conflict may be surprised to learn that a corporation she is studying has a high level of camaraderie and evidence of strong teamwork among workers at all status levels. If our findings consistently diverge from our theoretical explanations, we need to adjust our theories accordingly. Sociologists are in the business of creating useful theories based on good generalizations.

### DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.3

#### THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

#### What key aspects of sociology make it a social science?

In this activity, you will put your knowledge of what makes sociology a science to work.

Based on what you just read in this section, answer the following questions.

1. Why should multiple scientists conduct studies on the same topic?
2. Why is it important to explain how we conducted our research?
3. How do scientists test theories?
4. When do we know it is time to revise a theory?



**Check Your Understanding**

1. What makes sociology a social science?
2. How do sociologists use theoretical perspectives and theories?
3. Why do sociologists collect data in open, systematic ways?

**DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN GOOD GENERALIZATIONS AND STEREOTYPES****LEARNING QUESTION**

- 1.4 How can you tell the difference between a good generalization and a stereotype?

Has anyone said to you that “you shouldn’t generalize”? That was probably right after you made some disparaging remark about all the people from a particular town, all the movies starring a particular actor, or all roads in New Jersey. What you were doing (and they were right that you shouldn’t) was stereotyping or making a *bad* generalization. Sociologists generalize all the time as they recognize and point out social patterns in society. However, we aim to make good generalizations and avoid stereotyping. Good **generalizations** are statements, backed by evidence, used to describe groups of people or things in overall terms, with the understanding that there can always be exceptions.

**Stereotypes**

**Stereotypes** are predetermined ideas about particular groups of people (e.g., all Irish are drunks, all Asians are good at math) based on hearsay or personal experience and held regardless of contrary evidence. Often used to promote or excuse discriminatory treatment, stereotypes can spark irrational fear or favor. Some may be closer to the truth than others, but none are based on solid evidence. Stereotypes are bad generalizations.

Movies and television shows can both promote and challenge stereotypes. For example, in one scene in the film *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, the White, male boss hands Harold, a Korean American, a bunch of his work—so he can start his weekend early. The boss holds a stereotype of Asian Americans



Does this guy look like someone who just wants to crunch numbers all weekend? The movie *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* put a spotlight on some racial stereotypes about Asian Americans.

AF Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

that makes him think Harold (and all other Asian Americans) “live for” crunching numbers. Of course, however, movie viewers know that work is the last thing Harold wants to do that weekend.

Fortunately, in recent years, some television shows have included Asian characters who are not nerdy, glasses-wearing, numbers-crunching loving sidekicks. In fact, some are not even that bright! Remember Jason Mendoza from *The Good Place* or Josh Chan in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*? These characters help viewers see Asian Americans in a light that challenges traditional stereotypes.

### Good Generalizations

Good generalizations, unlike stereotypes, are based on social scientific research. For example, one common stereotype is that women are “chatty Cathys” and talk incessantly. A good generalization, on the contrary, is that in mixed-sex conversations, men tend to talk and interrupt more than women. Women ask more questions than men and tend to work harder at fostering conversation, but it is usually men who dominate verbal interactions (Gamble and Gamble 2015; Wolfe, as quoted in Maderer 2020).

Did you notice how the generalizations in the paragraph above are phrased? Unlike the stereotype about “chatty Cathys,” they describe what social scientists have found about speaking patterns without denigrating one sex or the other. Good generalizations are used to describe rather than judge groups of people.

Good generalizations must change when new data counter them. For example, the generalization that “most people in the United States oppose same-sex marriage” was once true but no longer qualifies as a good generalization. As our generalizations change with new data, so do our research questions. For example, we may now want to ask, what led to the change in attitudes toward same-sex marriage? And will this acceptance of same-sex marriage also lead to national legislation to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people from discrimination?

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.4

### STEREOTYPES AND GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT COLLEGE STUDENTS

#### How can you tell the difference between a good generalization and a stereotype?

In this exercise, you will examine the differences between stereotypes and good generalizations. You may be asked to share your responses with the rest of the class.

1. Explain the difference between a stereotype and a good generalization.
2. List three stereotypes you have heard describing the characteristics of students at your own school.
3. What could you do to determine if these stereotypes are generalizations or stereotypes? What steps would you take?
4. Could you make good generalizations about all college students based on good generalizations about students at your school? Why or why not?

### Check Your Understanding

1. On what are stereotypes based?
2. How do sociologists create good generalizations?
3. How does new information affect (a) stereotypes and (b) good generalizations?
4. For what purpose do sociologists use generalizations?

## THE OBLIGATIONS OF SOCIOLOGY

### LEARNING QUESTION

#### 1.5 What are the core commitments of sociology?

The earliest sociologists used sociology to find ways to understand and improve society. In 1896, Albion Small, the founder of the first accredited department of sociology in the United States (at the University of Chicago), implored his fellow sociologists to do so with these words:

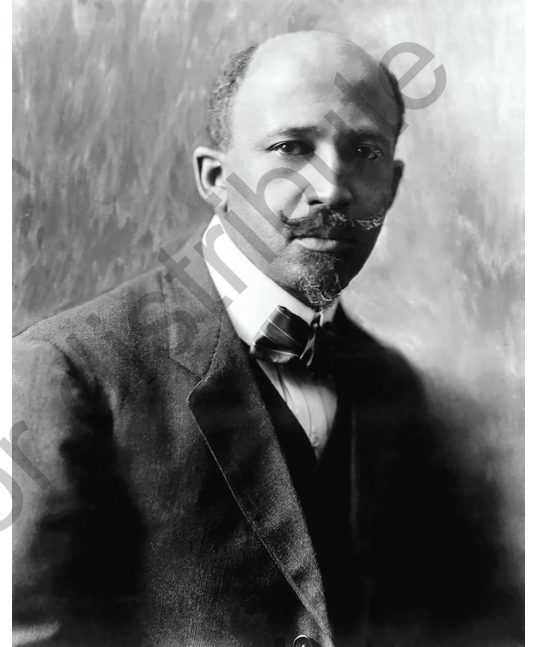
I would have American scholars, especially in the social sciences, declare their independence of do-nothing traditions. I would have them repeal the law of custom which bars marriage of thought with action. I would have them become more profoundly and sympathetically scholarly by enriching the wisdom which comes from knowing with the larger wisdom which comes from doing. . . . May American scholarship never so narrow itself to the interests of scholars that it shall forfeit its primacy among the interests of men! (Small 1896:564, 583)

W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the key founders of sociology, whom many White sociologists of his era ignored because of their racism, needed no prodding. An African American, Harvard-trained scholar, Du Bois faced rejection when applying for tenured faculty positions at historically White colleges and universities because of his race. Undaunted, he spent his career leading research studies at Atlanta University, writing prolifically, and organizing civil rights efforts.

Throughout his long career, Du Bois carried out a combination of research and activism, achieving groundbreaking work in both areas. In the late nineteenth century, Du Bois conducted the first large-scale, empirical sociological research in the United States, with the clear goal of refuting racist ideas about African Americans (Morris 2015). Later, he helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and tirelessly promoted civil rights for African Americans.

Jane Addams, the cofounder of the settlement house movement in the United States and another of the key early sociologists, worked with—and helped inspire—Du Bois. Just as Du Bois faced racism, however, Addams had to deal with sexism. Although Addams and her colleagues carried out numerous community research projects while living and working with low-income people in poor, urban neighborhoods, they also faced discrimination and did not receive the recognition they deserved.

The research Addams and her colleagues conducted helped guide that of Du Bois and many of the male faculty at the University of Chicago in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Deegan 1988). It also helped create such social goods as child labor laws, a juvenile court system, safer conditions for workers, and mandatory schooling for children. Addams cofounded both the NAACP (along with Du Bois, among others) and the American Civil Liberties Union.



W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the founders of sociology, used sociological tools to show how society works and to fight racism.

Underwood Archives/Archive Photos/Getty Images



Jane Addams

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

## The Two Core Commitments

In the spirit of Addams, Du Bois, and Small, Randall Collins (1998) has described two **core commitments** of sociology. The first core commitment of sociology is to *use the sociological eye* to observe social patterns. The second requires noticing patterns of injustice and *taking action* to challenge those patterns. Collins and the sociologists who have authored this book believe that sociology should be used to make a positive impact on society. If you have developed a sociological eye, you are obligated to use it for the good of society. For example, if we perceive that in more than half of the states in the United States, it is still legal to fire people on the basis of their sexual orientation (in nonreligious institutions as well as in religious organizations), we should work to address that injustice.

### DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.5

#### PRACTICING THE TWO CORE COMMITMENTS

#### What are the core commitments of sociology?

In this exercise, you will practice fulfilling the two core commitments of sociology.

Think about the social patterns at your school. Then write answers to the following questions:

1. What patterns appear unjust to you? (e.g., Are all campus workers paid a living wage? Do students from all social classes, genders, and sexual orientations feel safe and valued on your campus? Are there enough mental health services for students? Are classrooms, restrooms, and dorms accessible for everyone?)
2. If you obtained data that reveal a pattern of injustice, what would you do with it? What would you need to know about how the school operates to effectively address the injustice? (e.g., Who controls the curriculum? Who provides funding? Who decides where the money goes? Who determines punishments for violations of the student code of conduct?)
3. How does understanding how society (or your school) works help you to influence it?

#### Check Your Understanding

1. For what purpose did the earliest sociologists use sociology?
2. Why did W. E. B. Du Bois conduct large-scale empirical research in the United States?
3. What were some of the ways Jane Addams used sociological research to help create social goods?
4. What are the two core commitments of sociology?

## THE BENEFITS OF SOCIOLOGY

### LEARNING QUESTION

- 1.6** How can sociology benefit both individuals and society?

Developing a sociological eye and gaining a sociological perspective will benefit both you and society. You will notice social patterns that many others cannot see. Even if these patterns are unpleasant (sexism, racism, ableism, etc.), noticing and understanding them will help you develop ways of dealing with them in your own life. Forewarned is forearmed. You can also see patterns that you can proactively use to your advantage (e.g., what careers will be most in demand soon, how to gain social capital useful in the job market). Through gaining a sociological perspective, you will learn how to act more

effectively in groups and with members of different cultures. You will also gain the ability to collect, analyze, and explain information and to influence your society.

The last points concerning what you, personally, will gain from a sociological perspective relate to how sociology can help you contribute to society. Just knowing how society operates and how individuals are both shaped by and shapers of society can make you a more effective member of your community. You can learn how to work with others to improve your campus, workplace, neighborhood, and society.

### Sociology and Democracy

In democratic societies, it is particularly important for citizens who vote in elections to understand how society works and to develop the ability to notice social patterns. It is also vital that they be able to understand the difference between good information and fake news. As of 2021, more than half (59 percent) of Americans said most people disagree on basic facts (Connaughton 2021). Can you tell what news to trust? Checking to see if the data described in a news source were gained through the scientific research process and knowing how to tell the difference between good generalizations and stereotypes will help you discern real news from fake news.

Fake news became increasingly common during the 2016 presidential campaign. One piece, “BREAKING: ‘Tens of Thousands’ of Fraudulent Clinton Votes Found in Ohio Warehouse,” was shared more than 6 million times on social media before the election. Cameron Harris, then a recent college graduate, created a fake news site, *ChristianTimesNewspaper.com*, and included a picture of some ballot boxes in a warehouse (no one could tell that the warehouse was in England, not Ohio) to make his story appear “real” to viewers, who were unaware of the need to look into the veracity of the news source or the information described in the story (Shane 2017). The completely fabricated story took off. It’s hard to know how much this one story influenced the election, but it was far from the only fake news story sweeping across social media before Americans went to vote (you may remember “Pizzagate,” one of the more famous of the fake news stories leading up to the 2016 election) (Fisher, Cox, and Hermann 2016).

The same people who believed and promoted fake news stories like “Pizzagate” showed up at Trump rallies during the 2020 election. They brought “Q” (for QAnon) signs, indicating their allegiance to “an interactive conspiracy community” that views President Trump as a hero battling “anti-American saboteurs who have taken over government, industry, media and various other institutions of public life.” Alarming, this “paranoid worldview has crossed over from the internet into the real world several times. . . . On more than one occasion, people believed to be followers of QAnon have shown up—sometimes with weapons—in places that the character told them were somehow connected to anti-Trump conspiracies.” In this dark world, baseless conspiracy theories are facts (e.g., vaccines are harmful, Democrats are pedophiles, there are children being trafficked under Central Park in New York City, Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election), and facts (e.g., masks help prevent the spread of the coronavirus, vaccines save lives) are “fake news” propagated by the news media, which President Trump described as “the enemy of the American people” (Bank, Stack, and Victor 2018; Brooks 2018; Venkataramakrishnan 2020). Turning Americans against one another, these crazy ideas and groups threaten our social institutions, including families. As of February, 2021, “subreddit *r/qanoncasualties*,” one of the support groups for people with loved ones sucked into the QAnon world, had 133,000 members (Carrier 2021). Today, a sociologically informed public is more necessary than ever for a democratic society.

### Sociology and Careers

Finally, as noted earlier, sociological knowledge is useful in any career you can imagine—including teaching, business management, politics, human resources, medical administration, social work, non-profit management, and marketing. For example, to be effective, social workers need to understand the populations they serve and the structural and cultural forces affecting them. A marketer must have the research skills to learn what appeals to different groups and how to advertise to each most persuasively. Managers need cultural competency and emotional intelligence to create a motivated and engaged workforce. From knowing what job to apply for, what degree you need to gain it, and how to conduct yourself in the workplace, sociological skills can help you succeed in your career. In each of the chapters that follow, take note of the sociological skills you gain and in what professions you might use them.

The Sociologist in Action featured in this chapter, Megan Demit, describes some of the ways she uses her undergraduate sociology training in her life after college.

## SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

MEGAN DEMIT

### Using Sociological Skills to Help My Community during COVID and to Make Technology Accessible

As an undergraduate sociology major, I learned about structural inequities and developed a passion to help empower historically excluded communities. When COVID-19 hit and particularly threatened already vulnerable groups, my sociology training kicked in and pushed me to act. That's how I came to co-found SF Community Support.

San Francisco, where I live, was the first city in the United States to implement a stay-at-home order at the beginning of the pandemic. We were all uncertain about what the future would hold, but one thing I kept thinking about was how my elderly and immunocompromised neighbors would cope under these new restrictions. How would they get their families fed if they couldn't go outside, for fear of putting themselves at risk of contracting COVID? I started connecting with neighbors online, and a small group of us ended up cofounding SF Community Support—a mutual aid network. Since then, we've been matching volunteers with at-risk individuals to assist them with grocery shopping, running errands, and emotional support during the pandemic.

Because this effort was fully remote, I learned how technology plays an important role in democratizing information and providing opportunity—and, conversely, how “technology” as we know it might also be alienating or inaccessible to some. We created a website where those seeking assistance could submit requests online. Knowing that this method wouldn't work for everyone, however, we also gave out a phone number, posted fliers around neighborhoods, and introduced ourselves to members of the community. Studying sociology ingrained in me the notion that it's important to meet people where they are at and to notice the structural obstacles that may prevent them from accessing services.

As a master's student in User Experience Design now, I am learning how we can harness technology to make our lives easier. Thanks to my background in sociology, I always keep people unfamiliar with technological tools in mind as I design user experiences. I am focused on using the design skills I gain to make technological tools accessible to these traditionally marginalized groups of people—so they, too, can use them to improve their lives.

**Discussion Question:** How has Megan fulfilled the two obligations of sociology?

*Megan Demit graduated from the College of the Holy Cross with a degree in sociology and a minor in studio art. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in UX Design at the Maryland Institute College of Art while working at Save the Redwoods League in San Francisco, CA.*

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 1.6

### HOW CAN SOCIOLOGY BENEFIT YOU AND SOCIETY?

#### How can sociology benefit both individuals and society?

In this exercise, you will brainstorm all the ways society can benefit both you, as an individual, and the whole society.

Using the information in this chapter, write two lists: (1) the ways sociology can benefit individuals and (2) the way sociology can benefit society. Then, answer the following questions:

1. How does the second list affect individuals?
2. How does the first list influence society?
3. What does this tell us about the relationship between individuals and society?

### Check Your Understanding

1. How can sociology benefit individuals?
2. How can sociology benefit society, particularly democratic societies?
3. How might you use sociology in your career?

## CONCLUSION

In this introductory chapter, you learned that sociology, the scientific study of society, provides myriad benefits to both individuals and society. We now turn to how sociologists make sense of how society operates by looking at the different major sociological perspectives. As you will see, each perspective views the world in distinct ways. As you read the chapter, think about which perspective(s) make the most sense to you.

## REVIEW

### 1.1 What is sociology?

Sociology is the scientific study of society, including how individuals both *shape* and *are shaped* by society.

### 1.2 What do the sociological eye and the sociological imagination allow you to do?

A sociological eye enables you to see what others may not notice. It allows you to peer beneath the surface of a situation and discern social patterns. The sociological imagination gives you the ability to connect what is happening in your own life and in the lives of others to social patterns in the larger society.

### 1.3 What key aspects of sociology make it a social science?

Sociologists use theories and the scientific research process to formulate research questions and collect and analyze data to better understand how society operates.

### 1.4 How can you tell the difference between a good generalization and a stereotype?

Good generalizations, unlike stereotypes, are based on social scientific research, used to describe rather than judge groups, and change or are discarded with new information.

### 1.5 What are the core commitments of sociology?

The first of the two core commitments is to use the sociological eye to observe social patterns. The second commitment requires us to notice patterns of injustice and take action to challenge those patterns. Sociology should be used to make a positive impact on society.

### 1.6 How can sociology benefit both individuals and society?

Through gaining a sociological perspective, you will learn to notice and deal with patterns others do not recognize; act more effectively in groups and with members of different cultures; collect, analyze, and explain information; and influence your society. Sociological knowledge is useful in any career you can imagine.

In democratic societies, it is particularly important for citizens to develop the ability to notice social patterns and how to tell the difference between good generalizations and stereotypes, as well as between trustworthy and “fake” news.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might your life be different if you lived during a different time period or in another nation?
2. Why do you think we need a sociological eye to notice some social patterns? Why aren't social patterns obvious to everyone all the time?

3. How would you address a lack of affordable healthy food for low-income people (a) from an individualist perspective and (b) using your sociological imagination? Which would be more effective for the most people?
4. Can you see yourself fulfilling the two core commitments of sociology in response to a particular issue? If yes, both or only one? Why? If not, why not? Do you think most of your peers would be able and willing to do so? Why?
5. Give an example of how you can use sociology to understand how society works and to help shape society.

#### KEY TERMS

core commitments (p. 12)  
culture (p. 4)  
generalizations (p. 9)  
social structure (p. 4)

sociological eye (p. 5)  
sociological imagination (p. 5)  
sociology (p. 2)  
stereotypes (p. 9)