

Chapter 1

Sociology: Getting Your Head Around It

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding sociology
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You may be holding this book because you're enrolled in a sociology course in college or high school, or are thinking about studying sociology. You may be wondering if sociology can help you in your job; you may just be curious about different ways of looking at society; or you may be wondering about sociology for a different reason. Whatever the reason, you're reading this book because you want to know more about this thing called "sociology."

In this book, I explain the basics of sociology: what it is, how it's done, and what it's good for. Along the way, I do mention a lot of specific findings that sociologists have made, but my main goal is to tell you about *sociology*, not about *society*. After you understand the basics of sociology, you can roll up your sleeves and get online or into the library to see what sociologists have learned about any given place or time.

This chapter provides a road map to the rest of the book. In this chapter, I summarize the book and explain the basic ideas that this book will cover. I've organized the book to proceed from basic concepts to more specific topics, but the chapters are designed to stand alone, so you may not want to start right at the beginning.

Whatever path you take through this book — and through sociology generally — I hope you'll enjoy it and find the topic of sociology as fascinating as I do.

Understanding Sociology

In Part I of *Sociology For Dummies*, I explain the fundamentals of sociology: what it is, how it came to be, and how it's done.

Defining sociology

In a nutshell, sociology is the scientific study of society. Sociologists use the tools and methods of science to understand how and why humans behave the way they do when they interact together in groups. Though social groups — or societies — are made up of individual people, sociology is the study of the *group* rather than of the *individual*. When it comes to understanding how the individual human mind works, sociologists largely leave that up to psychologists.

Most people who call themselves “sociologists” work in universities and colleges, where they teach sociology and conduct sociological research. They ask a variety of questions about society, sometimes wanting answers just for the sake of curiosity; however, many times their findings are used to inform decisions by policymakers, executives, and other individuals. Many people who study sociology go on to conduct sociological research outside of academia, working for government agencies, think tanks, or private corporations. Accurate, systematic study of society is in one way or another useful to just about everyone.



Studying sociology, whether or not you call yourself a “sociologist,” means taking a particular view of the world: a view that sociologist C. Wright Mills called “the sociological imagination.” You have to be willing to set aside your ideas about how the social world *should* work so that you can see how it *actually* works. That doesn’t mean that sociologists don’t have personal values and opinions about the social world; they believe that to change the world, you first need to understand it.

The history of sociology

Sociology is considered one of the social sciences — along with economics, psychology, anthropology, geography, and political science (among others). The social sciences were born in the 18th and 19th centuries, as people began applying the scientific method to human life and behavior. The world was changing dramatically and quickly as industrial production replaced agriculture, as democratic republics replaced monarchies, and as city life

replaced country life. Realizing how many great insights science had lent regarding the natural world, people decided to try to use the same method to understand the social world.

Among the social sciences, sociology has always been unique in its ambition to understand the *entire* social world — considering all its aspects in combination rather than in isolation. It's a daunting task, and one that sociologists are still struggling with today.

The most important early sociologists had clear ideas about how to study and understand society; these ideas still form the basis for much sociological investigation and discussion today. Karl Marx emphasized the importance of physical resources and the material world; he believed that conflict over resources is at the heart of social life. Emile Durkheim emphasized cooperation rather than conflict: He was interested in the shared norms and values that make cooperative social life possible. Max Weber took ideas from both Marx and Durkheim and argued that both conflict *and* cooperation, both material resources *and* cultural values are essential to social life. (See Chapter 3 for more on Marx, Durkheim, and Weber.)

Over the past century, sociologists have continued to debate the early sociologists' ideas and have applied them to specific societies all over the world. Thanks in large part to the influence of “the Chicago School” of sociologists in the early 20th century (see Chapter 3 for more on them), sociologists today pay close attention to small groups and person-to-person interaction as well as to the grand sweep of social history. Today, sociologists appreciate that the big questions and the little questions regarding society are interlinked, and that you can't understand the macro (the big) without also understanding the micro (the little).

Doing sociology

From a scientific perspective, society is a very difficult subject to study: It's huge, complex, and always changing. A perennial challenge for sociologists is to develop ways to accurately observe society, and to test hypotheses about the way it works.

Fundamentally, sociological research proceeds along the same lines as scientific research in any discipline: You decide what you're interested in, see what other researchers have learned about that subject, ask a specific question, and find data to answer it; then you analyze those data and interpret your results. The next researcher to be curious about the topic takes your results into consideration when they conduct their own study.



Sociologists use both *quantitative* and *qualitative* research methods. (See Chapter 4 for more on these methods.) Quantitative research involves questions that are asked and answered in terms of numbers; qualitative research involves close observation and detailed descriptions, usually written. Quantitative studies usually make use of statistical methods — sometimes very sophisticated statistical methods— for determining whether or not a trend observed in a set of data is likely representative of a general population. In using statistics or any other research tool, sociologists must take great care to avoid any of several potential pitfalls that can lead to inaccurate or misleading interpretations of the data they observe.

Seeing the World as a Sociologist

To help make sense of the very complicated social world, sociologists have developed some useful perspectives — ways of thinking about the social world that both help them to understand that world and to ask interesting questions about it. Unless you understand these perspectives, sociology can be quite confusing. In Part II of this book, I explain a few of the most important sociological perspectives.

Understanding culture

Sociologists differentiate between *culture* (that is, ideas and values) and *structure* (that is, the basic organization of society). Some sociologists tend to focus on culture, whereas others focus on structure; what's safe to say is that both culture and structure can play important roles in shaping the social world. (See Chapter 5 for more on culture and structure.)

Understanding culture means understanding that ideas and values — including those represented in art and in the media — don't always perfectly reflect the way people behave. Sociologists of culture study the production of culture (how culture comes about) and the reception of culture (the effect of culture on people's actions and beliefs) separately. (See Chapter 5 for more.) They also study different types and levels of culture, from mainstream culture (culture that is widely shared) to subcultures (cultures that exist in opposition to mainstream culture) to microcultures (cultures that are self-contained within a broader set of cultures).



Culture can influence how people think about themselves as well as how they think about other people: It can unite as well as divide.

Microsociology

Understanding how society works at the micro level — that is, at the one-on-one, person-to-person level — is especially tricky because it involves understanding how social norms and influences play out in each person's head.

Sociologists, economists, and other social scientists are all tremendously concerned with understanding how people make decisions about their lives. Sometimes those choices make perfect sense (taking a job because you need the money to buy food to live), and sometimes they seem to make no sense at all (betting that money on a casino game you're almost guaranteed to lose, or donating it to someone living on the other side of the world).



A perennial hot topic in microsociology is understanding how and why people make decisions from moment to moment, taking into account both their individual needs and their social circumstances.

Sociologists also study how people use social roles and rules to interact with other people. Sociologist Erving Goffman pointed out that every person is in a way like an actor on a stage: Your social identity is the role you play, and the setting in which you're interacting with others is like the stage you're performing upon. Everyone understands this to some extent, and they sometimes take advantage of the fact to get the things they want in life. (See Chapter 6 for more on microsociology.)

Network sociology

It's not just your career advisor who's talking about the importance of personal networks: In recent decades, sociologists have increasingly come to appreciate the fact that who you know (and how you know them) is of fundamental importance in determining everything from your values to your economic and political power. A society isn't just one big cloud of people who all breathe the same air, it's a highly complex network in which each person is tied to other people by relationships that vary in nature and intensity. (More on network sociology in Chapter 7.)

You're connected — either directly or through friends of friends of friends — to just about everyone in your society, but your ties to some people are much tighter than your ties to others. The people closest to you are sources of great support, but the people to whom you're only distantly connected can be even more valuable when it comes to gaining information that your friends or coworkers can't (or won't) tell you. Your position in the social network determines what options you have when finding a job, making friends, or spreading your influence.



Some sociologists devote themselves specifically to network sociology, but just about every sociologist today uses the insights and methods of network analysis to some extent. In Chapter 7, I mention some of the specific social insights that have come from network analysis.

Understanding Differences Among People and Groups

An issue of paramount importance to sociologists is understanding differences and inequality among different social groups. In Part III of this book, I take a look at some of the principal lines that divide in society: among classes, among races, among religions, and between “deviant” and “non-deviant” people.

Social stratification

The word “stratification” refers to different levels on top of each other, and it can be used for society as well as for rocks. Some people in any given society have more power and freedom than others — sociologists refer to these differences as differences of *social class*. There seems to be class inequality in every society, but it’s much greater in some than in others, and sociologists have always debated whether or not significant class inequality is necessary for a society to function. (See Chapter 8 for more on social stratification.)



When you hear that someone is of a “higher class” than someone else, money is probably the first thing you think of, and indeed, money is certainly important. However, sociologists emphasize that there are many different means of social inequality: not just money, but occupation, ability, motivation, social connections, credentials, specialized knowledge, and discrimination by race, sex, caste, or age.

Class systems change over time, and people’s positions in those class systems change even more frequently. Social mobility is something sociologists study closely.

Race and sex

Sociologists distinguish between *race* (a label that others assign to you) and *ethnicity* (the cultural group heritage with which you identify). They also distinguish between *sex* (your biological status: male or female) and *gender* (the

way you identify your own status). All of these are among the most important distinctions in any society. Race, ethnicity, sex, and gender often serve as justification for discrimination and stereotyping, but they can also serve as common ground for people to bond with one another. (See Chapter 9 for more on race and ethnicity.)

Questions of race and ethnicity are particularly important today, when immigration is common and societies are increasingly diverse; but there are different races and ethnicities in *every* society, so for better and for worse, issues regarding race and ethnicity are timeless.



Institutionalized (that is, official) discrimination against members of particular races or sexes has happily declined sharply in recent decades, but distinctions of race, ethnicity, sex, and gender remain profoundly important in shaping how people see themselves and how they are seen by others.

Religion

Religion may seem like an unusual subject to study scientifically — but sociologists aim to understand the entirety of the social world, and religious beliefs and institutions are at the very center of that world. It is not for sociologists to determine what lies beyond this world, but sociologists can and do observe how religion affects people's lives in the here and now.

Sociologists study both religious values — what people believe about the spiritual world, specifically as it affects their actions in this world — and religious organizations. Like all social organizations, religious organizations have changed over time. What has remained the same is that for many people in all societies, religious groups are among the most important groups in their lives. (More on religion in Chapter 10.)

Crime and deviance

For sociologists, *crime* is one type of activity that falls under the general category of *deviance*. Deviance is defined as any kind of activity that varies from a social group's norms; crime is deviance that is formally punished with sanctions ranging from small fines to death.

Why do people commit crimes? Sociologists have different theories about that, but Durkheim famously observed that some form of crime has been present in every society ever known — in that sense, crime may or may not be good but it does seem to be “normal.” What counts as crime in any particular society is a matter of both that society's specific laws and the social interactions surrounding the crime.



Can crime be stopped, or at least limited? Even if there is never a perfectly crime-free society, sociological research provides many clues as to how the worst crimes might be curtailed. In Chapter 11, I provide several examples.

Social Organization

Sociologists are indeed curious about the lines that divide people in society, but they're equally curious about how people manage to work together. In Part IV of this book, I look at three major types of social organization that have been of great concern both to sociologists and to ordinary people who want to work and live together peacefully and productively.

Corporate culture

Whether you're a high school student or a retired worker, you've had plenty of experience (maybe more than you'd like) with what sociologists call *formal organizations*: corporations, nonprofits, and other organizations of people working together to achieve some goal. Well, at least that's what they *say* they're doing.

Sociologist Richard Scott has pointed out that social organizations behave as *rational*, *natural*, and *open* systems. They are *rational* because they do typically work in a machine-like manner to achieve some goal, but they are also *natural* because humans are not machines and they bring their own foibles and idiosyncrasies into the workplace with them. Further, they are *open* insofar as their behavior is influenced by the behavior of other organizations around them. I explain this in more detail in Chapter 12.

Social movements and political sociology

What about organizations founded for a very clear purpose, such as to bring about social change? Do they ever work? Yes, but not always. Many sociologists have studied the circumstances under which social movements are successful: In general, it seems to be a matter of being in the right place, at the right time, with the necessary resources to make your voice heard.

Understanding how and why social movements work (and don't work) is related to the general subject of political sociology: the study of government,

or “the state” in sociological parlance. Your government may seem to be big and invulnerable, but in the big picture, governments are quite fragile. (See Chapter 13 for more on the sociology of governments.)



Keeping a functioning government in business is a remarkable act of social cooperation, and when it doesn't work, the resulting revolution can have disastrous consequences for millions.

Urban sociology

Sociology was born in cities; specifically, in the fast-growing cities of the Industrial Revolution. There, people from wildly different backgrounds were encountering one another in what sometimes seemed like a chaotic stew of humanity. There was violence, disease and poverty, and an electrifying mix of languages, values, and ideas.

And 200 years later, the world is more urban than ever. How, and why, do people keep living in cities? Inner-city life is still crowded and excitingly intense, but not all urban life is inner-city life. Over the past several decades, millions and millions of people around the world have moved into suburban communities. As those suburbs have aged, some residents have moved back into the inner cities whereas others have moved even further out, to newly built “exurbs.” All along, sociologists have been there to study urban (and suburban, and exurban) change. You can read about it in Chapter 14.

Sociology and Your Life

Getting right to the heart of things, what relevance does sociology have for *your* life? In Part V, I explain how sociology can change the way you understand your past and your future.

The life course

Your life course, of course, is your own: You decide if and when you'll go to school, marry, have children, and retire. Still, at every stage you're affected by social institutions and social norms regarding the life course. What are you “supposed” to do? What happens if you don't? The timing and nature of life-course transitions varies greatly among societies, and sociologists have studied why.

As you live your life, you'll be profoundly influenced by the families you're a part of; sociologists and historians have shattered many myths about the family, and in Chapter 15 I explain how sociology can help you understand your own family. I also address the always-topical subject of health care, which influences not only how long you live but the quality of the life you have.

Social change

The one constant in social life is change: changing norms, changing classes, changing *everything*. Is there any way to make sense of all that change?

Sociologists believe there is, even if they sometimes disagree about exactly how. Marx believed that social change was driven by conflict over material resources. Durkheim thought that change was inevitable, with norms and values changing as societies became larger and more diverse. Weber thought that both material conflicts and changing norms influenced social change.

From the very beginning, sociologists have hoped to predict the future so as to be able to influence it. Sociology is, and will likely remain, a long way from being able to see the future any more clearly than meteorology can — but like weather forecasters, sociologists have a fair idea of when a storm front is brewing. What they may be most curious about is the future of sociology itself. Will sociology survive? What will society look like in the future? See Chapter 16 for my best guesses at the answers.

Sociology for Dummies, for Dummies

Still aren't entirely sure about all this? Try flipping forward to Part VI, "the Part of Tens." In chapters 17 and 18, I mention ten ways to use sociological insight in everyday life; also, I provide a list of ten readable sociology books that you can pick up if this book piques your interest. In Chapter 19, I list ten myths about society busted by sociology — ten things you may have *thought* you knew about the social world around you.

In the end, that's my best argument for why you should read this book: to learn more about the social world around you. Sure, you'll learn something about sociology itself — about Talcott Parsons's public spat with C. Wright Mills, about Arlie Hochschild's conversations with frustrated working mothers, about the sociologists who went to Paducah, Kentucky to talk with families affected by a tragic school shooting. But more importantly, in learning about sociologists' attempts to understand the ever-changing social world, you'll learn about that world itself, the world that gives meaning to your life.

Sociology: What's the point?

I hope you're excited to begin reading this book, but I don't flatter myself that it's the most important thing in your life right now. What *is* the most important thing in your life right now? Are you just starting a romantic relationship — or just ending one? Is something important going on at work? Are you preoccupied with a tough situation involving a loved one, or are you excited about an upcoming vacation or graduation?

All of those things are very personal, but they're also very social. You experience events like that individually, but your experience also involves the people around you — and the people around them, and the people around the people around them. As much as your life is your own, it is fundamentally, profoundly influenced — in

some ways, *defined* — by the society in which you live.

If you've done any traveling, or read books or see movies about other cultures, you realize how much norms, values, and practices vary from one society to the next. The choices you make are your own, but the choices you're given come from the society you're in, as does a lot about the way you regard those choices. If you don't understand how your society works and how it's shaped your life, you're in the dark about important parts of yourself. Only by understanding your society — which sociology can help you to do — can you truly understand yourself.

