1.S: Sociology and the Sociological Perspective (Summary)

Summary

1. Although Americans enjoy much freedom of thought and action, society constrains their views and behaviors.

2. The sociological perspective emphasizes that our social backgrounds influence our attitudes, behaviors, and life chances. The chances of committing even an individual act such as suicide depend to some degree on the group backgrounds from which we come.

3. Because sociology deals in generalizations and not laws, people don't always behave and think in the patterns sociologists predict. For every sociological generalization, there are many exceptions.

4. Personal experience, common sense, and the media are all valuable sources of knowledge about various aspects of society, but they often present a limited or distorted view of these aspects.

5. A theme of sociology is the debunking motif. This means that sociological knowledge aims to look beyond on-the-surface understandings of social reality.

6. According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination involves the ability to realize that personal troubles are rooted in problems in the larger social structure. The sociological imagination thus supports a blaming-the-system view over a blaming-the-victim view.

7. Theoretical perspectives in sociology generally divide into macro and micro views. Functionalism emphasizes the functions that social institutions serve to ensure the ongoing stability of society. Conflict theory focuses on the conflict among different racial, ethnic, social class, and other groups and emphasizes how social institutions help ensure inequality. Two micro perspectives, symbolic interactionism and utilitarianism, focus on interaction among individuals. Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals interpret the meanings of the situations in which they find themselves, while utilitarianism emphasizes that people are guided in their actions by a desire to maximize their benefits and to minimize their disadvantages.

8. Sociological research follows the scientific method. A major goal is to test hypotheses suggesting how an independent variable influences a dependent variable. Hypotheses can concern several units of analysis: the person, the organization, and the geographical region.
9. The major sources of information for sociological research are surveys, experiments, field research, and existing data. Surveys are the most common research method in sociology, but field research provides richer and more detailed information.

10. To be sure that an independent variable affects a dependent variable, we must be certain that the two variables are statistically related, that the independent variable precedes the dependent variable in time, and that the relationship between the two variables is not spurious.

11. Several ethical standards guide sociological research. Among the most important of these are the rights to privacy and confidentiality and to freedom from harm. Some sociologists have risked imprisonment to protect these rights.

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**USING SOCIOLOGY**

Imagine that you are the mayor of a city of about 100,000 residents. Similar to many other cities, yours has a mixture of rich and poor neighborhoods. Because you and one of your key advisers were sociology majors in college, you both remember that the type of neighborhoods in which children grow up can influence many aspects of their development. Your adviser suggests that you seek a large federal grant to conduct a small field experiment to test the effects of neighborhoods in your city. In this experiment, 60 families from poor neighborhoods would be recruited to volunteer. Half of these families would be randomly selected to move to middle-class neighborhoods with their housing partially subsidized (the experimental group), and the other 30 families would remain where they are (the control group). A variety of data would then be gathered about the children in both groups of families over the next decade to determine whether living in middle-class neighborhoods improved the children’s cognitive and social development.

You recognize the potential value of this experiment, but you also wonder whether it is entirely ethical, as it would be virtually impossible to maintain the anonymity of the families in the experimental group and perhaps even in the control group. You also worry about the political problems that might result if the people already in the middle-class neighborhoods object to the new families moving into their midst. Do you decide to apply for the federal grant? Why or why not?