1.2: Sociology as a Social Science

Learning Objectives

- Explain what is meant by the sociological imagination.
- State the difference between the approach of blaming the system and that of blaming the victim.
- Describe what is meant by public sociology, and show how it relates to the early history of sociology in the United States.

Notice that we have been talking in generalizations. For example, the statement that men are more likely than women to commit suicide does not mean that every man commits suicide and no woman commits suicide. It means only that men have a higher suicide rate, even though most men, of course, do not commit suicide. Similarly, the statement that young people were more likely to vote for Obama than for McCain in 2008 does not mean that all young people voted for Obama; it means only that they were more likely than not to do so.

A generalization in sociology is a general statement regarding a trend between various dimensions of our lives: gender and suicide rate, race and voting choice, and so forth. Many people will not fit the pattern of such a generalization, because people are shaped but not totally determined by their social environment. That is both the fascination and the frustration of sociology. Sociology is fascinating because no matter how much sociologists are able to predict people’s behavior, attitudes, and life chances, many people will not fit the predictions. But sociology is frustrating for the same reason. Because people can never be totally explained by their social environment, sociologists can never completely understand the sources of their behavior, attitudes, and life chances.

In this sense, sociology as a social science is very different from a discipline such as physics, in which known laws exist for which no exceptions are possible. For example, we call the law of gravity a law because it describes a physical force that exists on the earth at all times and in all places and that always has the same result. If you were to pick up the book you are now reading or the computer or other device on which you are reading or listening to it and then let go, the...
object you were holding would obviously fall to the ground. If you did this a second time, it would fall a second time. If you did this a billion times, it would fall a billion times. In fact, if there were even one time out of a billion that your book or electronic device did not fall down, our understanding of the physical world would be totally revolutionized, the earth could be in danger, and you could go on television and make a lot of money.

For better or worse, people and social institutions—the subject matter of sociology—do not always follow our predictions. They are not like that book or electronic device that keeps falling down. People have their own minds, and social institutions their own reality, that often defy any effort to explain. Sociology can help us understand the social forces that affect our behavior, beliefs, and life chances, but it can only go so far. That limitation conceded, sociological understanding can still go fairly far toward such an understanding, and it can help us comprehend who we are and what we are by helping us first understand the profound yet often subtle influence of our social backgrounds on so many things about us.

![Image](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Sacramento_City_College/SCC%3A_SOC_300_-_Introduction_to_Sociology_(Block)/T...)

**Figure 1.5:** People’s attitudes, behavior, and life chances are influenced but not totally determined by many aspects of their social environment. Thinkstock

Although sociology as a discipline is very different from physics, it is not as different as one might think from this and the other “hard” sciences. Like these disciplines, sociology as a social science relies heavily on systematic research that follows the standard rules of the scientific method. We return to these rules and the nature of sociological research later in this chapter. Suffice it to say here that careful research is essential for a sociological understanding of people, social institutions, and society.
At this point a reader might be saying, “I already know a lot about people. I could have told you that young people voted for Obama. I already had heard that men have a higher suicide rate than women. Maybe our social backgrounds do influence us in ways I had not realized, but what beyond that does sociology have to tell me?”

Students often feel this way because sociology deals with matters already familiar to them. Just about everyone has grown up in a family, so we all know something about it. We read a lot in the media about topics like divorce and healthcare, so we all already know something about these, too. All this leads some students to wonder if they will learn anything in their introduction to sociology course that they do not already know.

**How Do We Know What We Think We Know?**

Let’s consider this issue a moment: how do we know what we think we know? Our usual knowledge and understanding of social reality come from at least five sources: (a) personal experience; (b) common sense; (c) the media (including the Internet); (d) “expert authorities,” such as teachers, parents, and government officials; and (e) tradition. These are all important sources of our understanding of how the world “works,” but at the same time their value can often be very limited.

Let’s look at them separately by starting with personal experience. Although personal experiences are very important, not everyone has the same personal experience. This obvious fact casts some doubt on the degree to which our personal experiences can help us understand everything there is to know about a topic and the degree to which we can draw conclusions from our personal experiences that necessarily apply to other people. For example, say you grew up in Maine or Vermont, where more than 98% of the population is white. If you relied on your personal experience to calculate how many people of color live in the country, you would conclude that almost everyone in the United States is also white, which obviously is not true. As another example, say you grew up in a family where your parents had the proverbial perfect marriage, as they loved each other deeply and rarely argued. If you relied on your personal experience to understand the typical American marriage, you would conclude that most marriages were as good as your parents’ marriage, which, unfortunately, also is not true. Many other examples could be cited here, but the basic point should be clear: although personal experience is better than nothing, it often offers only a very limited understanding of social reality other than our own.

If personal experience does not help that much when it comes to making predictions, what about common sense? Although common sense can be very helpful, it can also contradict itself. For example, which makes more sense, *haste makes waste* or *he or she who hesitates is lost*? How about *birds of a feather flock together* versus *opposites attract*? Or *two heads are better than one* versus *too many cooks spoil the broth*? Each of these common sayings makes sense, but if sayings that are opposite of each other both make sense, where does the truth lie? Can common sense always be counted on to help us understand social life? Slightly more than five centuries ago, everyone “knew” the earth was flat—it was just common sense that it had to be that way. Slightly more than a century ago, some of the leading physicians in the United States believed that women should not go to college because the stress of higher education would disrupt their menstrual cycles (Ehrenreich & English, 1979). Ehrenreich, B., & English, D. (1979). *For her own good: 150 years of the experts’ advice to women*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books. If that bit of common sense(lessness) were still with us, many of the women reading this book would not be in college.

Still, perhaps there are some things that make so much sense they just have to be true; if sociology then tells us that...
they are true, what have we learned? Here is an example of such an argument. We all know that older people—those 65 or older—have many more problems than younger people. First, their health is generally worse. Second, physical infirmities make it difficult for many elders to walk or otherwise move around. Third, many have seen their spouses and close friends pass away and thus live lonelier lives than younger people. Finally, many are on fixed incomes and face financial difficulties. All of these problems indicate that older people should be less happy than younger people. If a sociologist did some research and then reported that older people are indeed less happy than younger people, what have we learned? The sociologist only confirmed the obvious.

The trouble with this confirmation of the obvious is that the “obvious” turns out not to be true after all. In the 2010 General Social Survey, which was given to a national random sample of Americans, respondents were asked, “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” Respondents aged 65 or older were actually slightly more likely than those younger than 65 to say they were very happy! About 33% of older respondents reported feeling this way, compared with only 28% of younger respondents (Figure 1.6). What we all “knew” was obvious from common sense turns out not to have been so obvious after all.

![Figure 1.6: Age and Happiness. Source: Data from General Social Survey, 2010.](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Sacramento_City_College/SCC%3A_SOC_300_-_Introduction_to_Sociology_(Block)/T…

If personal experience and common sense do not always help that much, how about the media? We learn a lot about current events and social and political issues from the Internet, television news, newspapers and magazines, and other media sources. It is certainly important to keep up with the news, but media coverage may oversimplify complex topics or even distort what the best evidence from systematic research seems to be telling us. A good example here is crime. Many studies show that the media sensationalize crime and suggest there is much more violent crime than there really is. For example, in the early 1990s, the evening newscasts on the major networks increased their coverage of murder and other violent crimes, painting a picture of a nation where crime was growing rapidly. The reality was very different, however, as crime was actually declining. The view that crime was growing was thus a myth generated by the media (Kurtz, 1997).

Expert authorities, such as teachers, parents, and government officials, are a fourth source that influences our understanding of social reality. We learn much from our teachers and parents and perhaps from government officials, but, for better or worse, not all of what we learn from these sources about social reality is completely accurate. Teachers and parents do not always have the latest research evidence at their fingertips, and various biases may color their interpretation of any evidence with which they are familiar. As many examples from U.S. history illustrate, government officials may simplify or even falsify the facts. We should perhaps always listen to our teachers and parents and maybe even to government officials, but that does not always mean they give us a true, complete picture of social reality.
Figure 1.7: The news media often oversimplify complex topics and in other respects provide a misleading picture of social reality. As one example, news coverage sensationalizes violent crime and thus suggests that such crime is more common than it actually is. © Thinkstock

A final source that influences our understanding of social reality is tradition, or long-standing ways of thinking about the workings of society. Tradition is generally valuable, because a society should always be aware of its roots. However, traditional ways of thinking about social reality often turn out to be inaccurate and incomplete. For example, traditional ways of thinking in the United States once assumed that women and people of color were biologically and culturally inferior to men and whites. Although some Americans continue to hold these beliefs, as we shall see in later chapters, these traditional assumptions have given way to more egalitarian assumptions. As we shall also see in later chapters, most sociologists certainly do not believe that women and people of color are biologically and culturally inferior.

If we cannot always trust personal experience, common sense, the media, expert authorities, and tradition to help us understand social reality, then the importance of systematic research gathered by sociology and the other social sciences becomes apparent. Although sociology sometimes does confirm the obvious, often it also confirms the nonobvious and even challenges conventional understandings of how society works and of controversial social issues. This emphasis is referred to as the debunking motif, to which we now turn.

The Debunking Motif

As Peter L. Berger (1963, pp. 23–24) notes in his classic book *Invitation to Sociology*, “The first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem.” Social reality, he says, has “many layers of meaning,” and a goal of sociology is to help us discover these multiple meanings. He continues, “People who like to avoid shocking discoveries, who prefer to believe that society is just what they were taught in Sunday School…should stay away from sociology.”
This is because sociology helps us see through conventional understandings of how society works. Berger refers to this theme of sociology as the debunking motif. By “looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretations of society” (p. 38), Berger, P. L. (1963). *Invitation to sociology: A humanistic perspective*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books. Berger says, sociology looks beyond on-the-surface understandings of social reality and helps us recognize the value of alternative understandings. In this manner, sociology often challenges conventional understandings about social reality and social institutions.

For example, suppose two people meet at a college mixer, or dance. They are interested in getting to know each other. What would be an on-the-surface understanding and description of their interaction over the next few minutes? What do they say? If they are like a typical couple who just met, they will ask questions like, What’s your name? Where are you from? What dorm do you live in? What’s your major? Now, such a description of their interaction is OK as far as it goes, but what is really going on here? Does either of the two people really care that much about the other person’s answers to these questions? Isn’t each one more concerned about how the other person is responding, both verbally and nonverbally, during this brief interaction? Is the other person paying attention and even smiling? Isn’t this kind of understanding a more complete analysis of these few minutes of interaction than an understanding based solely on the answers to questions like, What’s your major? For the most complete understanding of this brief encounter, then, we must look beyond the rather superficial things the two people are telling each other to uncover the true meaning of what is going on.

As another example, consider the power structure in a city or state. To know who has the power to make decisions, we would probably consult a city or state charter or constitution that spells out the powers of the branches of government. This written document would indicate who makes decisions and has power, but what would it not talk about? To put it another way, who or what else has power to influence the decisions elected officials make? Big corporations? Labor unions? The media? Lobbying groups representing all sorts of interests? The city or state charter or constitution may indicate who has the power to make decisions, but this understanding would be limited unless one looks beyond these written documents to get a deeper, more complete understanding of how power really operates in the setting being studied.

**Social Structure and the Sociological Imagination**

One way sociology achieves a more complete understanding of social reality is through its focus on the importance of the social forces affecting our behavior, attitudes, and life chances. This focus involves an emphasis on social structure, the social patterns through which a society is organized. Social structure can be both horizontal or vertical. Horizontal social structure refers to the social relationships and the social and physical characteristics of communities to which individuals belong. Some people belong to many networks of social relationships, including groups like the PTA and the Boy or Girl Scouts, while other people have fewer such networks. Some people grew up on streets where the houses were crowded together, while other people grew up in areas where the homes were much farther apart. These are examples of the sorts of factors constituting the horizontal social structure that forms such an important part of our social environment and backgrounds.

The other dimension of social structure is vertical. Vertical social structure, more commonly called social inequality, refers to ways in which a society or group ranks people in a hierarchy, with some more “equal” than others. In the United States and most other industrial societies, such things as wealth, power, race and ethnicity, and gender help determine
one’s social ranking, or position, in the vertical social structure. Some people are at the top of society, while many more are in the middle or at the bottom. People’s positions in society’s hierarchy in turn often have profound consequences for their attitudes, behaviors, and life chances, both for themselves and for their children.

In recognizing the importance of social structure, sociology stresses that individual problems are often rooted in problems stemming from the horizontal and vertical social structures of society. This key insight informed C. Wright Mills’s (1959) Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. London, England: Oxford University Press. classic distinction between personal troubles and public issues. Personal troubles refer to a problem affecting individuals that the affected individual, as well as other members of society, typically blame on the individual’s own failings. Examples include such different problems as eating disorders, divorce, and unemployment. Public issues, whose source lies in the social structure and culture of a society, refer to a social problem affecting many individuals. Thus problems in society help account for problems that individuals experience. Mills, feeling that many problems ordinarily considered private troubles are best understood as public issues, coined the term sociological imagination to refer to the ability to appreciate the structural basis for individual problems.

To illustrate Mills’s viewpoint, let’s use our sociological imaginations to understand some important contemporary social problems. We will start with unemployment, which Mills himself discussed. If only a few people were unemployed, Mills wrote, we could reasonably explain their unemployment by saying they were lazy, lacked good work habits, and so forth. If so, their unemployment would be their own personal trouble. But when millions of people are out of work, unemployment is best understood as a public issue because, as Mills (1959, p. 9) Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. London, England: Oxford University Press. put it, “the very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.” The growing unemployment rate stemming from the severe economic downturn that began in 2008 provides a telling example of the point Mills was making. Millions of people lost their jobs through no fault of their own. While some individuals are undoubtedly unemployed because they are lazy or lack good work habits, a more structural explanation focusing on lack of opportunity is needed to explain why so many people were out of work as this book went to press. If so, unemployment is best understood as a public issue rather than a personal trouble.

Another contemporary problem is crime, which we explore further in Chapter 5 “Deviance, Crime, and Social Control”. If crime were only a personal trouble, then we could blame crime on the moral failings of individuals, and many explanations of crime do precisely this. But such an approach ignores the fact that crime is a public issue, as structural factors such as inequality and the physical characteristics of communities contribute to high crime rates among certain groups in American society. As an illustration, consider identical twins separated at birth. One twin grows up in a wealthy suburb or rural area, while the other twin grows up in a blighted neighborhood in a poor, urban area. Twenty years later, which twin will be more likely to have a criminal record? You probably answered the twin growing up in the poor, run-down urban neighborhood. If so, you recognize that there is something about growing up in that type of neighborhood that increases the chances of a person becoming prone to crime. That “something” is the structural factors just mentioned. Criminal behavior is a public issue, not just a personal trouble.
A final problem we will consider for now is eating disorders. We usually consider a person’s eating disorder to be a personal trouble that stems from a lack of control, low self-esteem, or other personal problem. This explanation may be OK as far as it goes, but it does not help us understand why so many people have the personal problems that lead to eating disorders. Perhaps more important, this belief also neglects the larger social and cultural forces that help explain such disorders. For example, most Americans with eating disorders are women, not men. This gender difference forces us to ask what it is about being a woman in American society that makes eating disorders so much more common. To begin to answer this question, we need to look to the standard of beauty for women that emphasizes a slender body (Whitehead & Kurz, 2008). Whitehead, K., & Kurz, T. (2008). Saints, sinners and standards of femininity: Discursive constructions of anorexia nervosa and obesity in women’s magazines. *Journal of Gender Studies, 17*, 345–358. If this cultural standard did not exist, far fewer American women would suffer from eating disorders than do now. Even if every girl and woman with an eating disorder were cured, others would take their places unless we could somehow change the cultural standard of female slenderness. To the extent this explanation makes sense, eating disorders are best understood as a public issue, not just as a personal trouble.

Picking up on Mills’s argument, William Ryan (1976) Ryan, W. (1976). *Blaming the victim*. New York, NY: Vintage Books. pointed out that Americans typically blame the victim when they think about the reasons for social problems such as poverty, unemployment, and crime. They feel that these problems stem from personal failings of the people suffering them, not from structural problems in the larger society. Using Mills’s terms, Americans tend to think of social problems as personal troubles rather than public issues. They thus subscribe to a blaming the victim ideology rather than to a blaming the system belief.

To help us understand a blaming-the-victim ideology, let’s consider why poor children in urban areas often learn very little in their schools. A blaming-the-victim approach, according to Ryan, would say that the children's parents do not care about their learning, fail to teach them good study habits, and do not encourage them to take school seriously. This type of explanation may apply to some parents, in Ryan’s opinion, but it ignores a much more important reason: the sad shape of America’s urban schools, which are decrepit structures housing old textbooks and out-of-date equipment. To improve the schooling of children in urban areas, he wrote, we must improve the schools themselves, and not just try to “improve” the parents.
As this example suggests, a blaming-the-victim approach points to solutions to social problems such as poverty and illiteracy that are very different from those suggested by a more structural approach that "blames the system." If we blame the victim, we would spend our limited dollars to address the personal failings of individuals who suffer from poverty, illiteracy, poor health, eating disorders, and other difficulties. If instead we blame the system, we would focus our attention on the various social conditions (decrepit schools, cultural standards of female beauty, and the like) that account for these difficulties. A sociological perspective suggests that the latter approach is ultimately needed to help us deal successfully with the social problems facing us today.

Sociology and Social Reform: Public Sociology

This book's subtitle is "understanding and changing the social world." The last several pages were devoted to the subtitle's first part, understanding. Our discussion of Mills's and Ryan's perspectives in turn points to the implications of a sociological understanding for changing the social world. This understanding suggests the need to focus on the structural and cultural factors and various problems in the social environment that help explain both social issues and private troubles, to recall Mills's terms.

The use of sociological knowledge to achieve social reform was a key theme of sociology as it developed in the United States after emerging at the University of Chicago in the 1890s (Calhoun, 2007). Calhoun, C. (2007). Sociology in America: An introduction. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), Sociology in America: A history (pp. 1–38). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. The early Chicago sociologists aimed to use their research to achieve social reform and, in particular, to reduce poverty and its related effects. They worked closely with Jane Addams (1860–1935), a renowned social worker who founded Hull House (a home for the poor in Chicago) in 1899 and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Addams gained much attention for her analyses of poverty and other social problems of the time, and her book Twenty Years at Hull House remains a moving account of her work with the poor and ill in Chicago (Deegan, 1990).

About the same time, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), a sociologist and the first African American to obtain a PhD from Harvard University, wrote groundbreaking books and articles on race in American society and, more specifically, on the problems facing African Americans (Morris, 2007). Morris, A. D. (2007). Sociology of race and W. E. B. Du Bois: The path not taken. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), Sociology in America: A history (pp. 503–534). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. One of these works was his 1899 book The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study, which attributed the problems facing Philadelphia blacks to racial prejudice among whites. Du Bois also helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A contemporary of Du Bois was Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931), a former slave who became an activist for women's rights and also worked tirelessly to improve the conditions of African Americans. She wrote several studies of lynching and joined Du Bois in helping to found the NAACP (Bay, 2009).

American sociology has never fully lost its early calling, but by the 1940s and 1950s many sociologists had developed a more scientific, professional orientation that disregarded social reform (Calhoun, 2007). Calhoun, C. (2007). Sociology in America: An introduction. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), Sociology in America: A history (pp. 1–38). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. In 1951, a group of sociologists who felt that sociology had abandoned the discipline's early social reform orientation formed a new national association, the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP). SSSP's primary aim today remains the use of sociological knowledge to achieve social justice (http://sssp1.org). During the 1960s, a new wave of young sociologists, influenced by the political events and social movements of that tumultuous
period, again took up the mantle of social reform and clashed with their older colleagues. A healthy tension has existed since then between sociologists who see social reform as a major goal of their work and those who favor sociological knowledge for its own sake.

In 2004, the president of the American Sociological Association, Michael Burawoy, called for “public sociology,” or the use of sociological insights and findings to address social issues and achieve social change (Burawoy, 2005). Burawoy, M. (2005). 2004 presidential address: For public sociology. American Sociological Review, 70, 4–28. His call ignited much excitement and debate, as public sociology became the theme or prime topic of several national and regional sociology conferences and of special issues or sections of major sociological journals. Several sociology departments began degree programs or concentrations in public sociology, and a Google search of “public sociology” in June 2010 yielded 114,000 results. In the spirit of public sociology, the chapters that follow aim to show the relevance of sociological knowledge for social reform.

Conclusion

- Personal experience, common sense, and the mass media often yield inaccurate or incomplete understandings of social reality.
- The debunking motif involves seeing beyond taken-for-granted assumptions of social reality.
- According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination involves the ability to recognize that private troubles are rooted in public issues and structural problems.
- Early U.S. sociologists emphasized the use of sociological research to achieve social reform, and today’s public sociology reflects the historical roots of sociology in this regard.

For Your Review

1. Provide an example in which one of your own personal experiences probably led you to inaccurately understand social reality.
2. Provide an example, not discussed in the text, of a taken-for-granted assumption of social reality that may be inaccurate or incomplete.
3. Select an example of a “private trouble” and explain how and why it may reflect a structural problem in society.
4. Do you think it is important to emphasize the potential use of sociological research to achieve social reform? Why or why not?