

2. Sociology as a Way of Thinking About The World

by Neil Gabler and others

Sociology is a science. Sociologists and others in the social sciences usually do not use microscopes and test tubes, but like natural scientists they collect data (detailed information), make systematic observations, and develop concepts, hypotheses, and theories about what they discover and learn about human behavior and activities. Like other sciences, sociology uses data to accurately describe, usually in depth, things occurring in the world and it uses a variety of tools to understand what is going on.

What makes sociology both so interesting and so challenging is its subject: group life and human interaction. Human social life is huge and complex: there are answers to sociological questions, but there usually aren't any *easy* answers. In addition to the challenge of answering sociological questions, there's the challenge of *asking* them -- that is, of thinking about society and group life as a subject of objective study. Studying society scientifically means figuring out what is actually going on in a particular situation and how the groups and group life under study actually work. When we do that we can learn amazing true things about the world.

Because sociologists can study anything in social life – and, in fact, do study just about everything that has anything to do with people interacting -- some of the subjects studied by sociologists are very controversial, such as abortion, teenage pregnancy, drug policy, policing, race, corporate power, immigration, the wealth of the richest one percent, and the effects of government action and inaction. If sociologists avoided controversial subjects, that would defeat the whole point of the discipline.

Corporations, nonprofit organizations, governments, businesses, social movements, labor unions, churches, motor cycle gangs, families, and other social organizations are deliberate attempts of people working together to accomplish tasks. Sometimes those attempts work and sometimes they don't, and usually they have other unexpected or unanticipated effects and consequences. Peoples' lives are absolutely tied to the groups they are in (including family, school, job, neighborhood, city and nation), and are deeply affected by the activities and power of large organizations around them, especially corporations and governments, again, whether they realize it or not.

As many people have said, sociology continually develops ways of seeing and thinking about the world around us. Sociologists study so many different topics that many of those topics are also studied by people who don't consider themselves social scientists.

Sociology can sometimes use those observations and findings; sometimes sociologists have to critique or debunk them, especially ones that achieve a level of conventional wisdom.

Sociology and other social sciences collect a great deal of information and sociology studies specific human activities and their effects in their larger and comparative context. Like all physical and social scientists, sociologists seek to make accurate generalizations about what they find. Because sociologists consider many aspects of the social world together, they can see patterns and connections that people who study only part of the social world cannot. The sociologist Peter Berger has suggested that “the first wisdom of sociology is that things are not as they seem.” Beginning with that first wisdom or principle, sociology seeks to discover, describe and explain what is in fact going on using a variety of concepts including, in this course, *culture* and *institutions*.

Welcome to sociology.
