

What Sociology Studies

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to the field of sociology. You will receive a brief overview of the discipline and the perspectives that we will be developing and employing throughout this course. You will also explore how studying sociology improves your self and social awareness skills. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Studying Society With Sociology



BEFORE YOU START

A **group** is any collection of at least two people who interact with some frequency and who share some sense of aligned identity. A group of people who live in a defined geographic area, who interact with one another, and who share a common culture is what sociologists call a **society**.

Sociology is the study of groups and group interactions, and of societies and social interactions. It is an academic discipline that is focused on asking “why” about our social lives. It uses a scientific approach to answer questions about people and how they live in a society.



HINT

When we say sociology is scientific, we mean that it is a way of studying the world that combines logically constructed theories and intense observation.

Sociologists study all aspects and levels of society, from the personal and individual to the big picture.

Sociologists working from the zoomed in, micro-level usually study small groups and individual interactions, while those using big picture macro-level analysis look at trends among and between large groups and societies.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A micro-level study might look at the accepted rules of conversation in various groups such as among teenagers or business professionals. In contrast, a macro-level analysis might research the ways that language use has changed over time or in social media outlets.

All sociologists are interested in the experiences of individuals and how those experiences are shaped by interactions with social groups and society as a whole. To a sociologist, the personal decisions an individual makes do not exist in a vacuum, or independent of a greater sociological context. Cultural patterns and social forces put pressure on people to select one choice over another. Sociologists try to identify these general patterns by examining the behavior of large groups of people living in the same society and experiencing the same societal forces.

To talk about these ideas, sociologists use the terms **agency** and **structure**. Agency is the extent to which a person can exercise free will in their choices. Structure is the larger society in which we make those choices.

When you study sociology, you are building an awareness of others' cultures, perspectives, and experiences, which makes you better able to relate to and communicate with others. You also gain a deeper understanding of your own culture and yourself. This **self and social awareness skill** will be an asset in your professional and personal life.



BIG IDEA

We do not make personal decisions or live our lives in a vacuum, separate from what is happening in the world and in this moment in history. Sociologists care about connecting the individual to that broader sociological context.

The prominent sociologist Peter L. Berger (1929–2017), in his book *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (1963), describes a sociologist as “someone concerned with understanding society in a disciplined way.” He asserts that sociologists have a natural interest in the monumental moments of people’s lives, as well as a fascination with banal, everyday occurrences. Berger also describes the “aha” moment when a sociological theory becomes applicable and understood:

“[T]here is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don’t people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms—until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology.” (Berger, 1963)



THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever had an “aha” moment of connecting events and experiences in your own life to a larger social and cultural context?



TERMS TO KNOW

Sociology

The study of groups and group interactions, and of societies and social interactions.

Group

Any collection of at least two people who interact with some frequency and who share some sense of aligned identity.

Society

A group of people who live in a defined geographic area, who interact with one another, and who share a common culture.

Agency

The degree to which people can exercise free will over their choices

Structure

The larger society that controls our ability to exercise agency

2. The Development of Sociology

Over the course of human history, people have sought to make sense of the world around them. Some people turn to natural science to understand the function of the natural world. Others look to religion or philosophy to interpret morality and purpose in the universe. And still others look at each other, and the culture and society around them, and try to understand why people behave the way they do. Many people have engaged in a form of sociology throughout time in casual, curiosity-driven ways. But sociology as an academic discipline as we understand it today can be traced to the scientific revolution of 16th century Europe.

With the scientific revolution came the development of the physical and natural sciences. Their success led scholars to apply scientific principles to other areas of study as well. In the 18th century, during Europe's Enlightenment period, philosophers in France declared that it was possible to study people and social interaction from a scientific perspective. As their work continued, they began to replace religious morality with a more naturalistic form of ethics focused on ideas like universal human rights, liberty, and equality.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a French philosopher during the Enlightenment. He developed a theory about societies and published it in a book called *The Social Contract*. He explained that authority only exists because people allow it to exist. He stated that governments only exist with the "consent of the governed," meaning that people en masse have to decide to accept the authority of a government or ruler.

While this idea underpins much of modern society, at the time it was practically heresy. European societies at the time were dominated by two powerful forces: Christianity and monarchy. Neither the church leaders nor the kings and queens liked the radical idea of having to get consent to stay in power. Rousseau and other thinkers of the Enlightenment were a big influence on the ideology behind both the French and American Revolutions.

In the 19th century in Europe, the Industrial Revolution changed how people worked and lived in a dramatic way. Mills and factories were growing, and cities expanded rapidly as people moved to where the jobs were and started to congregate in urban environments. Those cities were often dirty and crowded and anonymous. Factories and mills did not provide any safety gear, ventilation, or guidelines to prevent injury. There were no public works or safety guidelines for living or work spaces.

Prior to the growth of the European cities, many people lived together in small communities that were governed by shared ideas about how to behave and relate to one another. In the cities, people from different places were all crowded together. The lack of community connection, particularly among those without families, resulted in alienation from society for many. Emile Durkheim, one of the 19th century founders of sociology, theorized that the need to belong to a community is so significant that when people lose those connections they suffer greatly. We will talk about this more in depth in Challenge 1.2.

Out of this environment came the formal beginnings of sociology. Traditionally, sociology as a discipline is attributed to Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, three men who lived in Europe in the 19th century, but many other people had major contributions to the origins of the field.

Founder name	Lifespan	Contribution
Jean-Jacques Rousseau	1712-1778	Authority or power cannot be assigned without consent.

Emile Durkheim	1858-1917	People require a sense of community and meaningful social interactions.
Karl Marx	1818-1883	Capitalism is an economic system in which workers work to enrich others and it is inherently exploitative and alienates workers from the outcome of their efforts.
Max Weber	1864-1920	The spread of Protestantism helped create and expand capitalism because of the work ethic it created in its adherents.
George Herbert Mead	1863-1931	Our sense of “self” is a result of social interaction with others.
Auguste Comte	1798-1857	Coined the term sociology. He believed that research in the social sciences can be measured scientifically.
Harriet Martineau	1802-1876	Overcame deafness, disability and sexism to be a self-supporting social theorist and writer. Translated Comte's work into English from French thereby spreading the readership of his work throughout Europe.

You will see these names again later in this course. But you will read about others as well.

Although sociology started in Europe as a result of a number of historical phenomena happening simultaneously, the discipline has since expanded to include the social and cultural perspectives of people around the world.

3. Improving Society With Sociology

Since it was first founded, many people interested in sociology have been driven by the scholarly desire to contribute knowledge to this field. Others have seen sociology as a way not only to study society, but also to improve it.

IN CONTEXT

When Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957, she was met by an angry crowd. But she knew she had the law on her side.

Three years earlier, in the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned twenty-one state laws that had allowed Black children to be taught in separate school systems, as long as the school systems for Black children were “equal” to those for white children. The 1954 decision prohibited segregated schools in the entire country, overturning decades of legal precedent. Why did the Supreme Court justices decide that the legal precedent no longer held up?

The justices were influenced by sociology, particularly research conducted by the husband-and-wife team of sociologists, Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Their research into segregated school districts showed that segregation was harmful to young Black students. The Court found that if segregated systems were harmful to Black students as the Clarks' research had found, then the systems were inherently unequal, which made the separate systems unconstitutional.

Sociology has played a crucial role in many important social reforms, not just desegregation in the United States. The research and findings of sociologists have been used to improve opportunity for women in the workplace, to improve treatment for individuals with mental disabilities or learning disabilities, to increase accessibility and accommodation for people with physical disabilities, to reinforce the right of Native populations to preserve their lands and cultures, and to demand prison system reforms.

IN CONTEXT

When men shipped off to fight in World War II, many women entered the formerly all male workforce. After World War II, those same women were expected to return to their prior lives at home. Some, having grown accustomed to the rewards that come from paid employment, didn't want to return to working only in the home. Other women's lives were irreparably changed by the war and had to work. There were also certain assumptions made about women, such as that they didn't need to work because they were married, were going to get married, or were being taken care of by their father. It didn't matter that every family looks different, and that individual women may have wanted a different life; the cultural assumption was that women would return home after the war.

Those same assumptions led to paying women less than men for the same jobs. Their income was only considered "supplemental," as though a woman would only have a job for pocket change while a man paid the real bills. This assumption also led to paying people of color and immigrants less money for the same jobs as well. For the next several decades, women who did stay in the workforce were often fired if they became pregnant, and even if they weren't fired, without maternity leave many women couldn't expect their jobs to still be there when they returned from a long time away from the office.

Sociological inquiry helped to change many of these unfair practices. By scientifically demonstrating the reality lived by millions of women and millions of workers, this type of research informed policy changes in the United States and brought about the signing of landmark legislation such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and Title 1 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

There is still much work to be done in terms of fairness and equality in the workplace for women, especially women who are women of color, immigrants, disabled, and/or transgender. Sociological research shows us both how far we have come—right after WWII, women earned approximately 60 cents for every dollar earned by men in the same jobs, and today women earn over 83 cents for every dollar earned by men—and how much farther we have to go.

Sociology can be exciting because it teaches people ways to recognize how they fit into the world and how others perceive them. Looking at themselves and society from a sociological perspective helps people see where they connect to different groups based on the many different ways they classify themselves and how society classifies them in turn. It raises awareness of how those classifications—such as economic and social status, education, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—affect perceptions.



Self and Social Awareness: Skill in Action

Having knowledge of sociology is an asset no matter which career you choose. Teachers must understand their students' cultures and norms. Business professionals must be able to work well with a diverse group of colleagues, many times from all over the world. Additionally, anyone who enjoys traveling must learn the customs and norms of their travel destination. By learning about other cultures, we gain insight into ourselves. We will likely see that many of our thoughts and behaviors have been guided by the culture in which we grew up.

Sociology teaches people not to accept easy explanations. It teaches them a way to organize their thinking so that they can ask better questions and formulate better answers. It makes people more aware that there are many different kinds of people in the world who do not necessarily think the way they do. It increases their willingness and ability to try to see the world from other people's perspectives. This prepares them to live and work in an increasingly diverse and integrated world.



Remember the general in the particular. When you can do that, you can be a better informed citizen, because you can understand how certain social and economic policies might affect individual people.



If you've ever had questions about the world we live in, like why things are the way they are in our society, then you're already thinking like a sociologist! In the following *Sophia Story*, you'll learn how studying sociology will help you in your education, life, and career. You'll also get a sneak peek at the real people and stories that will bring these ideas to life throughout this course.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **studying society with sociology** means engaging in the systematic study of human society and the behavior of people in groups. You have learned about what social factors and historical events lead to the **development of sociology**. You saw some of the ways in which researchers have been **improving society with sociology**, and were introduced to important perspectives that will soon be covered in more detail. Finally, you learned that building a strong foundation strengthens your self and social awareness skill, benefiting all aspects of your life.

Best of luck in your learning!

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REFERENCES Berger, P. L. (1963). *Invitation to sociology: A humanistic perspective*. Doubleday.

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