



The Sociological Perspective

Part I

Using the sociological perspective changes how we perceive the surrounding world and ourselves.

Peter Berger

Sociology

- ...the systematic study of human society
- *systematic*
 - scientific discipline that focuses attention on patterns of behavior
- *human society*
 - group behavior is primary focus, how groups influence individuals and vice versa
- *at the heart of sociology*
 - the sociological perspective which offers a unique view of society

Sociology

- Sociology is the discipline that attempts to understand the social forces - the forces outside us - that shape our lives, interests and personalities.
- It's the science of society and social behavior.



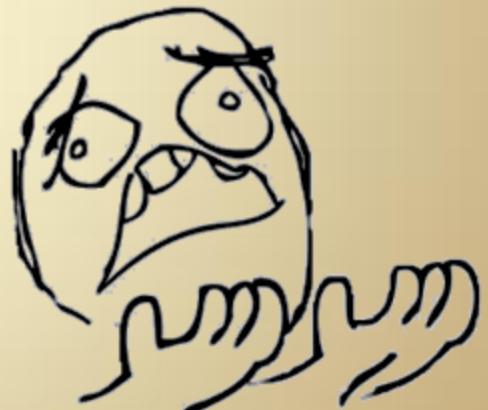
What is the Sociological Perspective?

- ...the study of human life and social interactions, as well as how those interactions shape groups and society as a whole
- views society as a product created by humans that can be changed by them as well
 - how groups influence people
 - how people are influenced by their society, people who share a culture or a territory
- With the sociological perspective you can look beyond commonly held beliefs to the hidden meanings behind human actions.

What is the Sociological Perspective?

- Sociology looks at the power of society to shape your individual life.
 - Why are you going to college?
 - Who will you fall in love with?
 - How many children will you have?
 - Will you commit suicide?

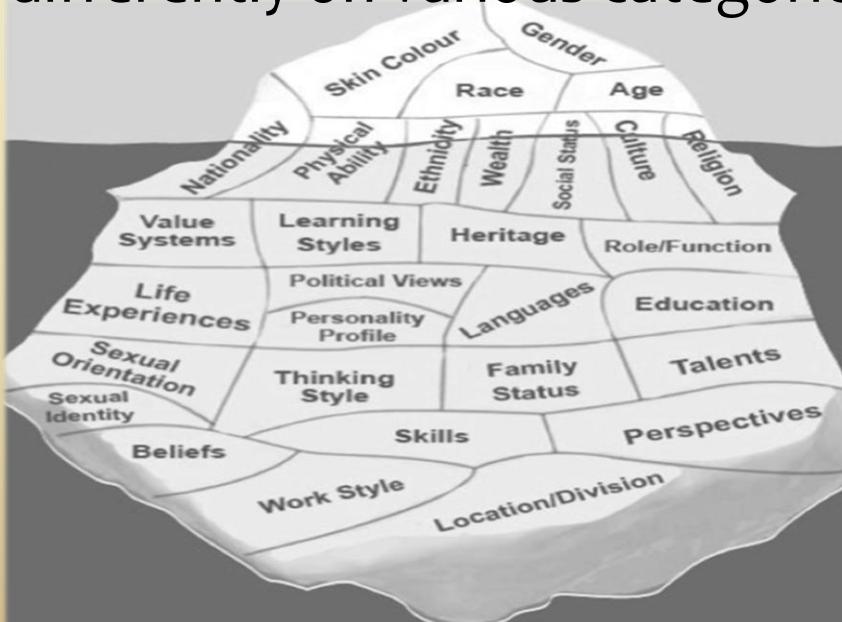
WHY



MUST YOU MAKE ME QUESTION
EVERYTHING?

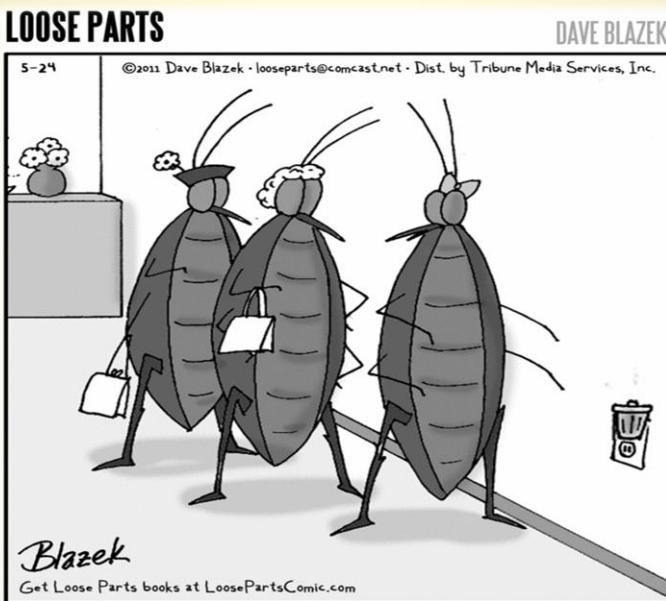
What is the Sociological Perspective?

- seeing the general in the particular
 - Sociologists identify general social patterns in the behavior of particular individuals.
 - Individuals are unique.
 - Society acts differently on various categories of people.



What is the Sociological Perspective?

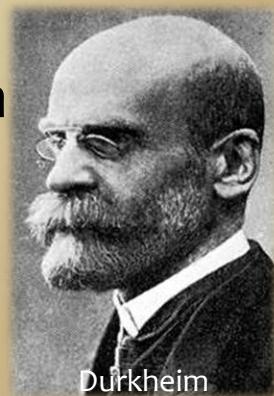
- seeing the strange in the familiar
- giving up the idea that human behavior is simply a matter of what people decide to do
- understanding that society shapes our lives



"See? You just plug it in and your house
smells like festering garbage for days!"

What is the Sociological Perspective?

- seeing individuality in social context
 - Émile Durkheim's research on suicide showed that some categories are more likely to commit suicide than others. Society affects even our most personal choices.
 - more likely to commit suicide: males, Protestants (individualism), wealthy, unmarried
 - less likely to commit suicide: females, Jews and Catholics (group orientation), poor, married
 - The differences between the groups had to do with **social integration**: Those with strong social ties are less likely to commit suicide.



Durkheim

What is the Sociological Perspective?

- seeing personal problems in public issues
- C Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959)
 - **sociological imagination:** the awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society
 - an outlook which tries to steer us into thinking away from our usual day-to-day life and looking at it differently, understanding how our biography is a result of historical process and occurs within a larger social context, social outcomes are based on what we do
 - abortion, home foreclosure, number of children in Chinese families, etc



Mills

The Sociological Imagination

- ...the ability to situate personal troubles within an informed framework of larger social processes
- a willingness to view the social world from the perspective of others
- focusing on the social, economic and historical circumstances that influence families, groups and organizations
- questioning the structural arrangements that shape social behavior
- seeing the solutions to social problems in terms not of changing people but of changing the structure of society

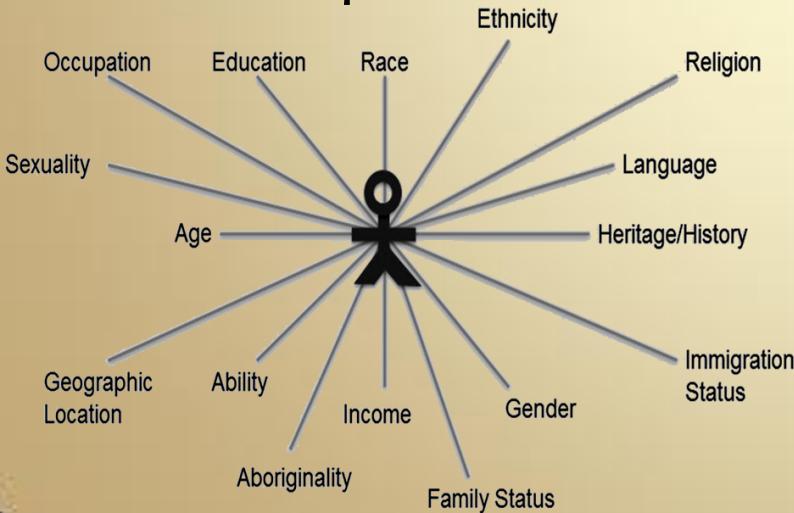


What is the Sociological Perspective?

- The sociological perspective stresses the social contexts in which people live and how these contexts influence people's lives.
- At the center of the sociological perspective is the question of how groups influence people, especially how they are influenced by their society.
- To find out why people do what they do, sociologists look at **social location**: the group memberships that people have because of their location in history and society.
- These are the corners in life that people occupy because of where they are located in a society.

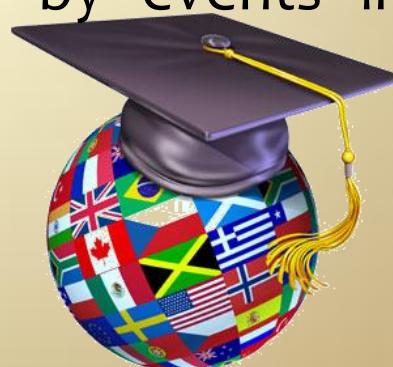
Social Location: Corners in Life

- age (old, middle age, young, etc)
- race
- ethnicity
- gender (male, female)
- sexual preference
- urban / rural
- religion
- education (dropout, high school, college, etc)
- social class (rich, working class, poor, etc)
- occupation
- income
- wealth
- marital status



What is the Sociological Perspective?

- **global perspective:** Sociology studies both the global network and our unique experiences.
- The lives of people around the world are connected and intertwined.
- One country's problems are part of a larger global situation.
- Seemingly local events are shaped by events taking place in foreign countries.
- The individual biography is shaped by events in foreign locations.



What is the Sociological Perspective?

- Sociology offers us the opportunity to understand the global village.
 - **interdependency of nations:** All societies are increasingly connected through technology, communications and economics.
 - **more awareness:** Many social problems faced by Americans are more serious elsewhere.
 - **fewer ethnocentric tendencies:** Understanding global issues and the world around us allows us to better understand ourselves.

What is the Sociological Perspective?



Assumptions of the Sociological Perspective

- Individuals are, by their nature, social beings.
- Individuals are, for the most part, socially determined.
- Individuals are shaped by **history** (location in broad stream of events) and **biography** (individual's specific experiences).
- Individuals create, sustain and change the social forms within which they conduct their lives.
 - **troubles**: explained in terms of individual shortcomings
 - **issues**: explained by factors outside an individual's control and immediate environment
- The quality of interaction is shaped by forces outside the individual and by the presence of other people who notice what is going on.

Benefits of the Sociological Perspective

1. helps us assess the truth of common sense
2. helps us assess both opportunities and constraints in our lives
3. empowers us to be active participants in our society
4. helps us to recognize diversity and live in a diverse world
5. draws attention to social crises
6. allows us to see the connection between **micro** (small-scale) and **macro** (large-scale) social elements



Risks of the Sociological Perspective

- People prefer to keep nooks and crannies hidden.
- People attempt to keep secrets.
- People feel threatened by information.
- Topics may be sensitive and invoke strong feelings among those participating.



"I love our lunches out here, but I always get the feeling that we're being watched."

Pure and Applied Sociology

- A distinction between pure (or basic) and applied science is drawn in every scientific field.
 - **Pure science** is a search for knowledge, without primary concern for its practical use.
 - A sociologist making a study of the social structure of a slum neighborhood is working as a pure scientist.
- **Applied science** is the search for ways of using scientific knowledge to solve practical problems.
- A study on how to prevent delinquency in a slum neighborhood is applied science.

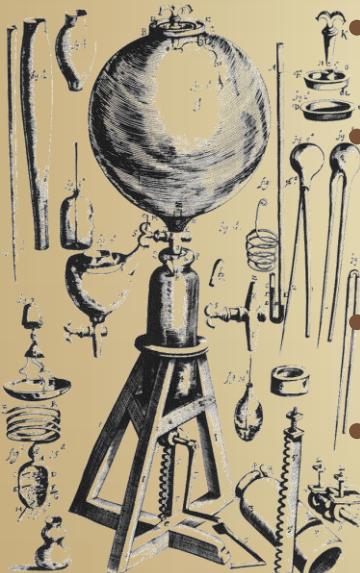
Pure and Applied Sociology

- Practical applications of sociological knowledge have become quite common.
 - Sociologists are employed by corporations, government bureaus and social agencies often in evaluation research but sometimes in administration.
 - Sociologists are often consulted by legislative committees preparing new legislation. Their policy recommendations are a significant factor in the legislative process.



The Historical Development of Sociology

- emerged in mid-1800s
- tradition vs. science
 - Comte's stages: theological, metaphysical, scientific
 - **positivism**: a means to understand the world based on science
 - success of natural sciences
 - **the scientific revolution**: A belief in science began to replace traditional forms of authority.



The Historical Development of Sociology

- grew out of **social upheaval** and rethinking of social life
 - Industrialization, urbanization and political revolution promoted a new awareness of society.
 - Industrialism and capitalism changed economic patterns.
 - the **industrial revolution**: changed the nature of work, assembly lines replaced artisans, led to growing urban areas
 - **nature of interaction**: People could connect in reliable, less time-consuming ways.
 - the **political revolution**: More democratic values and standards were adopted.

The Historical Development of Sociology

- marginal voices
 - Important contributions were made by those who were pushed to the margins of society.
 - Rationality and reason emerged in response to unresolved social problems.
 - grounded in failure of existing institutional forces to mitigate social problems



The Historical Development of Sociology

- Auguste Comte (1798-1857)
 - coined the word sociology
 - sought to establish sociology as a science and emphasized positivism
 - applied the scientific method to social world
 - **social engineering:** efforts to influence popular attitudes and social behaviors on a large scale, whether by governments, media or private groups



The Historical Development of Sociology

- Karl Marx (1818-1883)
 - considered the founder of the conflict perspective: Sociologist's task is to analyze and explain conflict.
 - reasoned that the type of economy found in society provides its basic structure ... conflict shaped by the means of production
 - founder of political / economic theory of socialism (communism) ... Industrialization resulted in two classes: owners and laborers.
 - wrote the Communist Manifesto (8:17) and co-wrote *Das Kapital* (with Friedrich Engels)



The Historical Development of Sociology

- Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)
 - second founder of sociology
 - lower and higher forms of society
 - coined phrase **survival of the fittest** in reference to human social arrangements (Social Darwinism)
 - advocated against social reform efforts to poor people because it disrupts the natural selection process of evolution



The Historical Development of Sociology

- Émile Durkheim (1858-1917)
 - founded sociology as an academic discipline
 - famous for his study on suicides (1897)
 - use of statistics in sociology
 - provided the rationale for sociology by emphasizing **social facts**: social factors that exist external to individuals
 - studied how social forces affect behavior
 - identified **social integration**: degree to which people are tied to social group
 - Émile Durkheim and Social Solidarity (8:35)



The Historical Development of Sociology

- Max Weber (1864-1920)
 - Sociologists can never capture the reality of society but should focus on ideal types that best capture the essential features of aspects of social reality.
 - showed that the basic structure of society comes from three sources: politics, economics and culture
 - focused on how industrial revolution changed thoughts and action and how it brought about the process of **rationalization**: the way daily life is organized so as to accommodate large groups of people

The Historical Development of Sociology

- Max Weber
 - Religion is a central force in social change.
 - religion and the origin of capitalism: *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*
 - People are becoming prisoners of new technology and losing individuality.
 - *verstehen*: to grasp by insight ... the importance of subjective meanings



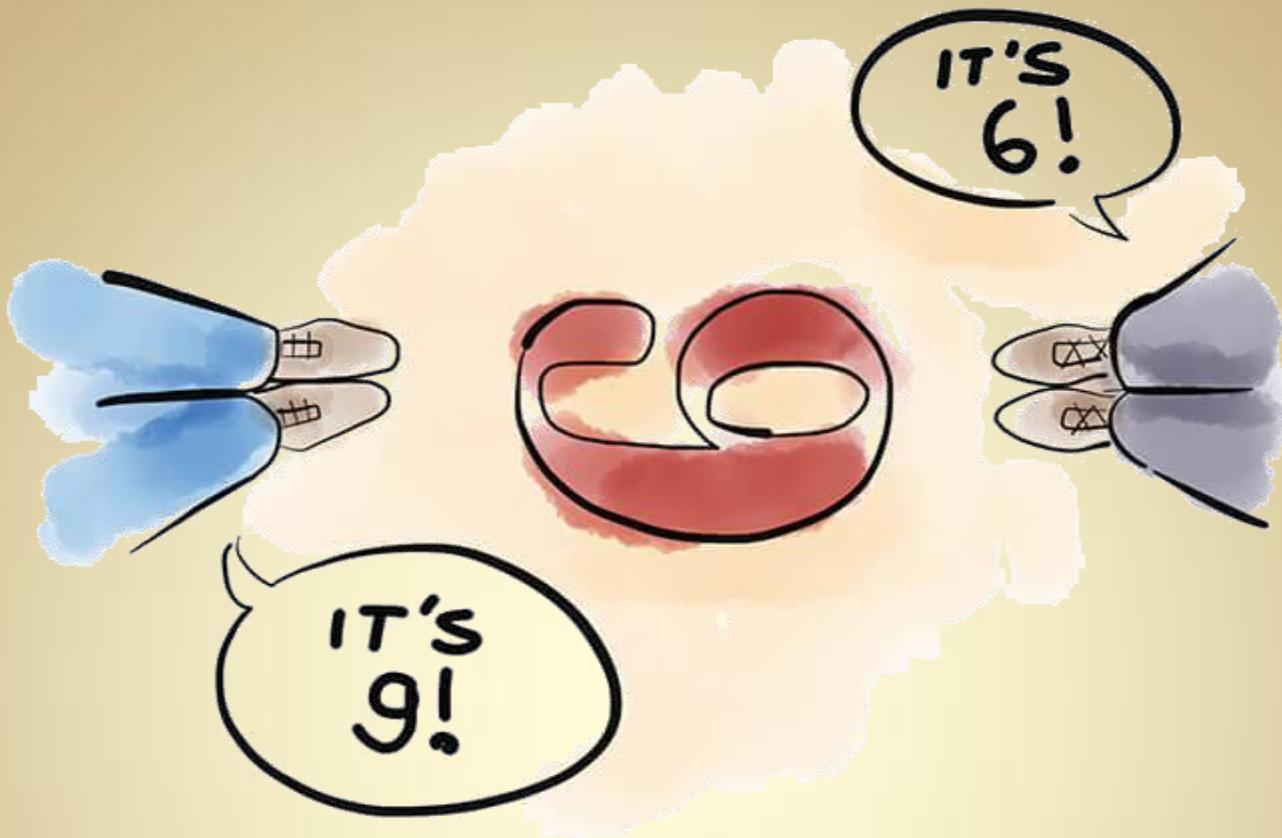
The Historical Development of Sociology

- sexism in early sociology
 - attitudes of the time
 - 1800s: sexual roles rigidly defined
 - few people educated beyond basics
 - Harriet Martineau (1802-1876)
 - first acknowledged female sociologist
 - translated Comte's work into English
 - concerned with social change and the plight of women and children in English factories during the early phases of industrialization

The Historical Development of Sociology

- Harriet Martineau
 - examined emerging American society (c 1834)
 - wanted to communicate her observations without expressing her judgments
 - gave a focus to her observations by asking reader to compare workings of society with principles on which thought was founded, thus testing the state of affairs against an ideal standard
 - published *Society in America* before Durkheim and Weber were born
 - Her work was ignored.





continued in
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Part II