

4. Sociology as a Way of Thinking About The World

by Jay Gabler and others

Sociology is a science. And it is an unusual science because its subject is so large and complex – all of human social life, especially groups and organizations in the modern world. As in all sciences, sociologists do research, collect data (detailed information), make systematic observations, and develop concepts, hypotheses, and theories about what they discover and learn. Like other sciences, sociology uses data and concepts to accurately describe, usually in depth, the groups and organizations they study.

We all live within in a dense web of group life – in families, schools, jobs, religions, political movements, ethnic and other cultural groups, neighborhoods, cities and even nations. We are all especially affected by the activities and power of large organizations around us, especially corporations and governments, whether we see and recognize their impact or not. And as sociology often makes startlingly clear, *what we don't know can really hurt us.*

Corporations, nonprofit organizations, governments, businesses, political and religious movements, labor unions, motor cycle gangs, families, and other social organizations are deliberate attempts of people working together to accomplish tasks. As is often very obvious, sometimes those attempts work well and successfully for most people, but often they do not. Further, almost all human activities have some unexpected or unanticipated effects and consequences, some of which can be very harmful to large numbers of people.

Because sociologists can and do study almost anything in social life – some of the subjects studied by sociologists are politically controversial, such as abortion, teenage pregnancy, drug laws, policing policies, racial prejudice and how race or skin-color affects the way people are treated, gender roles and identities, corporate power, immigration, the wealth of the richest one percent, war, the effects of government action and inaction on our health, safety, and the fate of our planet's air, water, and natural life. If sociologists avoided controversial subjects, that would defeat the whole point of the discipline.

Because sociologists study so many different topics, many of those topics are also studied by researchers in other fields. Sociologists can often use the observations and findings from fields like economics, political science, psychology, social psychology, and especially anthropology and history. Sometimes sociologists have to critique or debunk

the ideas or findings of others, especially when those ideas or claims become a widely-accepted form of conventional wisdom.

Like all physical and social scientists, sociologists seek to make accurate, truthful generalizations about what they find. Because sociologists consider many aspects of the social world together, they often can see patterns and connections that people who study only part of the social world cannot.

One of the hardest things about sociology is that it often requires us to recognize that some familiar part of social life is not the way we thought it was, and often not the way we would like it to be. And because change is the one inevitable in the modern world, there is always the question of which part of the world around us is changing right now and in what way. When we look closely, we see that some things get worse, some things get better, and some just become different from what they had been. As a result, sociological writings, especially the best ones, often have the effect of making something familiar seem different and even strange because we see it from new angles, from new perspectives, and with new information. And sometimes, because of social change, they really are different.

The sociologist Peter Berger has suggested that “*the first wisdom of sociology is that things are not as they seem.*” That’s another way saying that looking hard and closely at some part of social and group life often makes what was familiar seem different and strange.

Beginning with that first wisdom or principle – things are not as they seem – sociology seeks to discover, describe and explain what is in fact going on in any particular situation using a variety of concepts including, in this course, *culture* and *institutions*

Welcome to sociology.
