

## **Sociology 101: The Social Lens**

### ***Unit 1 Overview: What is Sociology?***

Are you curious about why some your friends think or act differently than you do? Do you ever wonder how things were different for teenagers when your parents or grandparents were young? Are you ever suspicious that your teachers aren't giving you the real story about something that has happened at your school? Do you ever speculate about why some families are rich and some are poor, why some people commit crimes and other people do not, or why some students are popular and others have no friends? If so, you are enrolled in the right course, because sociologists think about these things too.

**Sociology** is the “systematic, scientific study of human society.” Human society is a pretty big topic. Sociologists study dyads, groups and networks, organizations, communities, culture, society, and even global relations. In some senses it seems like you can study almost anything and call it sociology. It isn't what they study that makes someone a sociologist, however, but how they think about it and how they study it.

Imagine a friend of yours confides in you that she is pregnant and is not planning to marry the father. At first you wonder if she was raped, but she tells you the father is someone she was dating, she agreed to have sex with him, and she turned down an invitation to marry him. You might wonder why her behavior is so different from what you think it should be. If you were raised in this country, where we tend to be better amateur psychologists than we are amateur sociologists, you would probably conclude that your friend has mental problems, isn't thinking very clearly, or is not a very good person. In other words, you would probably explain your friend's behavior in terms of what goes on inside of her and think that she has a **personal problem**. In contrast, a sociologist would be curious about what life at home was like for your friend, whether people from her background respect mothers more than they respect women without children, and if the father of her child was ready for the responsibility of a family. In other words, a sociologist would explain your friend's pregnancy and decision to remain single in terms of the circumstances she is facing that are basically out of her control. Studying the immediate social circumstances surrounding people and how it shapes their behavior and attitudes is the subject matter of **micro-sociology**.

To tell you the truth, some sociologists wouldn't actually be that interested in your friend's problem per se, but they would be interested in understanding why so many young women today have children without getting married. One out of three children born in the United States today has an unmarried mother. Back in the 1950's, only one out of twenty children in the United States was born to an unwed mother. Do families no longer have control over the behavior of their teenagers? Is it easier and therefore more attractive to be a single mother now than it was in the past? Are men less desirable as mates than they were before? What is different now? So someone with a **sociological imagination** would see unwed motherhood as a **public issue**, rather than as a personal problem, and your friend as an unknowing victim of a societal-level social forces rather than as someone who was totally in control of her destiny. The study of large social phenomena such as changes in the rates of births to unwed mothers is known as **macro-sociology**.

Today the large number of unwed mothers poses a practical problem for society, and sociologists are conducting research to try to understand why it is happening. Practical problems like this appear, are solved, and disappear, however, and then new ones develop. It would be a pretty big waste of time to

start from scratch to solve a problem each time a new one pops up. Instead, what sociologists do is keep track of what they learn each time they conduct a research project, share it with other sociologists, and make a note of findings that repeat themselves in different situations. For example, let's say one sociologist finds that married couples with a child are less likely to divorce than married couples without a child. And another sociologist finds out that treaties among three countries are more likely to last than treaties between two countries. Hmmm? Could it be that three-person or three-country groups are more likely to survive than two-person or two-country ones? Now you have a **hypothesis** that you can test in yet another circumstance, perhaps by studying friendship networks or rock 'n' roll acts. After studying comparing a lot of three-entity and two-entity groups, you might even be able to develop a **theory** to explain why the former is more likely to survive than the latter. Then you would have a tool that can be used the next time a relevant problem arises or research findings need to be explained.

Theories are explanations of why things happen the way they do, but they are also lenses we wear when we view the world. Depending on what theoretical lenses we wear, we ask different types of questions, collect different types of data, and find different answers. In this course you will learn about three different theories of social life—**functionalism**, **conflict theory**, and **symbolic interactionism**. Depending on which set of these theoretical lenses you choose to wear, you would ask different questions about the increase in the rate of births to unwed mothers. By the time you finish this unit, you should be able to figure out what those questions would be.

Of course, you can't answer any theoretical questions without data. Just as sociologists study a wide variety of topics and view them through different types of theoretical lenses, they also collect different types of information to develop theory and to solve practical problems. Sometimes they conduct surveys, other times they analyze documents, and still other times they observe people interacting. Sometimes they summarize their findings by reporting statistics and other times they summarize their findings in words. Whatever sort of research they do, however, sociologists want to know what the facts are and whether they are accurate. If they are interested in theoretical development, they want to know if the existing theories stand up to empirical testing. If they are interested in solving a problem, they want to know what solution the facts suggest.

Sociology developed during the time of the Industrial Revolution. The original sociologists were fascinated by the radical transformation of society that occurred as new industries and technologies developed, the population shifted from rural to urban areas, and problems such as crowding, poverty, and crime grew more widespread. Most of the sociological classics that have shaped our way of thinking about the effects of the Industrial Revolution were written by white men such as Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. Although they haven't received as much attention, women such as Addams and Martineau and people of color such as Dubois and Wells-Barnett also contributed to our understanding of this major transformation. Today is a great time to start using your own sociological imagination, because society is going through another radical transformation now that the Information Revolution has begun. Maybe when your great-great grandchildren study sociology, they will consider your work a classic. But first you have to get started using your sociological imagination.