

CHAPTER 1

What is Sociology?

LECTURE OUTLINE

LECTURE PLAN

1. HOW YOUR LIFE IS *CONNECTED*
2. WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?
3. ORIGINS OF SOCIOLOGY
4. BACK TO YOU: WHY SOCIOLOGY?

1. HOW YOUR LIFE IS *CONNECTED*

a) Common sense tells you that your behaviour patterns and preferences are your own choices (i.e., what you wear, what you eat, who your friends are)

- An *individualist* view of behaviour is our ‘social default’
- Example: obesity seen as an individual failing, lack of willpower, etc.
- But what if there’s more to obesity than a flawed individual?

b) The social context of obesity

- The power of social networks: if a friend of yours becomes obese, your chances of also becoming obese increase by 57 per cent
- Obesity is “socially contagious” (Christakis & Fowler, *The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over 32 Years*, 2007) (Christakis, *The Spread of Obesity in Social Networks*, 2010)
- Obesity also reflects patterns of social inequality: poor people at greater risk of obesity than rich people (Devaux & Sassi, *European Journal of Public Health*)
- Studies also show that lower income neighbourhoods have closer access to fast food

c) Locating yourself in a social context

- Our lives and our capacity to make choices (‘agency’ are connected in a dynamic relationship with organized patterns of social relationships (‘structure’)
- The ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills): an awareness of the linkages between individual behaviour and the wider society
- Sociologists as experts in ‘pattern recognition’ ie. how obesity follows social patterns

d) Another example: driver behaviour

- Are wealthy people more rude and inconsiderate? Can we observe that in how they drive?
- Researchers observed driver behaviour at intersections, noting which were driving high status vehicles
- Findings: drivers of luxury cars 4X more likely to cut off other drivers, 3X less likely to yield at pedestrian crossings
- Dubbed the “Asshole Effect” (Manne, 2014)
- Significance: concrete evidence of how social structure (social class) influences collective behaviour

2. WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

a) A starting definition

- A scientific way of using the sociological imagination in “the systematic study of society and social interaction” (Ch.1)
- Sociologists focus primarily on collective (group) behaviour in social contexts
- Sociologists use the scientific method: they conduct research to produce verifiable, objective answers to social questions

b) Going a little deeper

- Sociology can either be macro (the study of large groups or entire societies) or micro (small groups, or individuals within groups)
- Even though sociologists aspire to *objectivity*, they also value *subjectivity*: taking seriously the lived experience of individuals

3. ORIGINS OF SOCIOLOGY

a) Beginnings

- Curiosity about and reflection on human relations goes back to the ancient world
- The focus on *society* as an object of scientific inquiry emerged in Europe with the rapid social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution: urbanization, democratic revolutions, the growth of social inequality, etc.
- The term *sociology* was coined by French thinker Auguste Comte
- Comte’s primary focus in formulating a systematic study of society was to address social problems

b) The European foundations

- Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber were pioneering observers of the social impacts of the Industrial Revolution
- Much of what we call *macro sociology* – the study of large groups or entire societies – is based on their work

c) Sociology in North America

- The Chicago school (established in the late 1800s): the enduring contribution of their research to *micro sociology* is based on their focus on small-scale social interaction
- Early Canadian sociology was distinguished by two foci of research: 1) political economy, which looks at the interrelationships between states, markets and individuals; and 2) social inequality
- Contemporary Canadian sociology is extremely diverse, including a broad range of research interests (i.e., inequality, cultural diversity, religion, etc.)

4. BACK TO YOU: WHY SOCIOLOGY?

a) Your life as connected

- Seeing how your own choices and behaviours are connected to the social world expands your understanding of yourself *and* the world
- More critical awareness of the forces influencing you (structure) will enhance your ability to make good choices (agency)
- In an increasingly confusing and more rapidly changing world, sociology helps you to stay oriented
- Sociology is simultaneously concrete and global

b) Seeing the strange in the familiar

- Developing your sociological imagination opens the door to “seeing the strange in the familiar” (Berger, 1963): looking behind ‘common sense’ understandings to see aspects of social life from an outsider’s point of view
- An outsider’s point of view reveals to you things that we normally take for granted
- An example of seeing the strange in the familiar is *personal space*: you know instantly when someone stands too close to you, but that comfort zone differs depending on who that person is

c) Careers in sociology

- Students of sociology bring valuable skill sets to a variety of careers
- i.e., insight into social issues, critical thinking skills, etc.
- A partial list of careers in sociology (Centre, n.d.)

LECTURE READINGS AND RESOURCES

Berger, P. L. (1963). *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. New York: Anchor Books.

Centre, Y. U. (n.d.). *Career Options in Sociology*. Retrieved from York University:
<http://careers.yorku.ca/my-degree/sociology/>

- Christakis, N. (2010). *The Spread of Obesity in Social Networks*. Retrieved from YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJfq-o5nZQ4>
- Christakis, N., & Fowler, J. H. (2007). The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over 32 Years. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 370-379.
- Devaux, M., & Sassi, F. (European Journal of Public Health). Social inequalities in obesity and overweight in 11 OECD countries. *European Journal of Public Health*, 464-469.
- Manne, A. (2014, July 7). The age of entitlement: how wealth breeds narcissism. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/08/the-age-of-entitlement-how-wealth-breeds-narcissism>

IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. “HOW CLOSE IS TOO CLOSE?”

Relevant Learning Outcomes:

3. Describe the sociological imagination
4. Explain sociologists' emphasis on seeing the strange in the familiar

Instructions

1. Divide the students into groups of 4-6, and provide each group with a measuring tape.
2. Instructions for the students as follows:

One person stands still. Another stands about 2 meters from them, and then begins to approach very slowly. The first person calls out 'Stop' when it feels as if the other is too close. Using the measuring tape, the other group members then measure the distance between them and record it. Someone makes up a rough chart.

Take turns. Make sure you repeat the exercise enough to see if the results are consistent

*Groups #1 and #2: does **height** make a difference?*

*Groups #3 and #4: does **eye contact** make a difference?*

*Groups #5: does **gender** make a difference?*

3. Have the groups share their results. Debrief by introducing the concept of *personal space* (unwritten social norms that determine zones of proximity). Ask the students to explain how their experience of the experiment is an example of the sociological imagination. Offer the students a definition of “seeing the strange in the familiar” and ask them to explain how the experiment was an example of the concept.

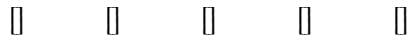
2. “THE SOCIOLOGY OF URINAL SELECTION”

Relevant Learning Outcomes:

4. *Explain sociologists' emphasis on seeing the strange in the familiar*
6. *Comprehend the relationship between structure and agency*

Instructions:

1. Draw a diagram like the following on blackboard or smart board:



2. Ask for volunteers from the males in the class to come to the front of the room and explain for the benefit of the female students how men select which urinal to use in a public washroom when a) one other urinal is in use, b) two other urinals are in use, c) three other urinals are in use.
3. The exercise will generate a lot of laughter at the same time as it reveals a set of unwritten rules for washroom behaviour that have a determining influence on individual choices.
4. Ask the students to explain how this scenario is an exercise in seeing the strange in the familiar. Ask them to reflect as well on how the scenario reveals the presence of social structure in a micro situation.
5. As a closer, play the students an excerpt of the YouTube animation video “Male Restroom Etiquette”, which provides a tongue-in-cheek overview of urinal selection. (The video runs 9:57, but playing up to 3:10 will be sufficient.)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzO1mCAVyMw&t=2s>

3. “HOW WE LOOK AT OTHERS”

Relevant Learning Outcomes:

4. *Explain sociologists' emphasis on seeing the strange in the familiar*

Instructions:

1. Give the students a brief summary of the satirical journal article “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema” by Horace Miner (mentioned in Chapter One). You might want to read aloud some of his prose. (A link to the article is provided below.)
2. Then introduce them to the story of anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon’s first encounter with the Yanomamo of the Amazon rain forest. Read them an excerpt from his diary, describing that first encounter (the third paragraph from the beginning of the article, in italics).
3. Think/Pair/Share (2 minutes). Ask the students to reflect on the diary entry, and to think about who is weird and who is normal in that moment. Then they pair up with someone sitting nearby and share their reflections.
4. Debrief with the class. What do the descriptions of the Nacirema and the Yanomamo teach us about “strangeness” vs. familiarity? How does point of view play a role in that?

Resources for this activity:

“Body Ritual Among the Nacirema”

<https://www.sfu.ca/~palys/Miner-1956-BodyRitualAmongTheNacirema.pdf>

Napoleon Chagnon biography

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Napoleon_Chagnon

Napoleon Chagnon’s diary (excerpt)

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/my-regrets-about-controversial-anthropologist-napoleon-chagnon-rip/>

4. “I COMMIT SOCIOLOGY”

Relevant Learning Outcomes:

1. *Define Sociology*
5. *Understand the differences between sociology and other disciplines*

Instructions:

1. Provide the students with copies of the Michael Adams article “I commit sociology and I don’t intend to stop” <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/i-commit-sociology-and-i-dont-intend-to-stop/article11667231/>
2. Put students into groups; each group reads the article and is tasked with answering one of the following questions:
 - *What inspired Michael Adams to write this article? (Clue: look in Chapter One.)*
 - *Based on his description, what is it that sociologists do?*
 - *What is the basis of the play on words in the title of the article, and how does that present itself in the article itself?*
3. Give each group a few minutes to summarize their response to their question. They may need some direction to understand the full significance of the satirical title ie. that to “commit sociology” is, in a sense, a subversive act in a socio-political moment in which the powers that be are resisting what sociology can bring to light. The two primary takeaways for students should be that a) sociologists look for connections and reveal insights about society that defy received common sense, and b) sociology has a long history of not just studying society, but also commitment to improving social conditions.

TEACHING AIDS

1. ***Why sociology is not the “study of the painfully obvious”.*** [YouTube]. This video of a conversation between American sociologists Richard Appelbaum and Deborah Carr provides a lively introduction to two concepts from Chapter One: the sociological imagination, and the notion of an interplay between agency and structure. (Runs 5:39) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0T9GmLhO2P0>
2. ***The Spread of Obesity in Social Networks.*** [YouTube]. An animated data visualization of Christakis and Fowler’s analysis of changes in the body mass index (BMI) of individuals in a large social network (as mentioned in the lecture outline). A side issue to raise with students might be whether BMI is a fair measure of whether an individual is or is not obese. (Runs 1:48) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJfq-o5nZQ4&t=1s>
3. ***Everyday Sociology Blog.*** A site created for students and teachers of sociology that features short posts by sociologists. The site places emphasis on current issues as well as accessible language. Both written and video content are featured. It is a rich source of examples and topics with which to enliven seminar or lecture material; instructors can also feel comfortable sending students to this site if they are seeking more topics for assignments or presentations. <https://www.everydaysociologyblog.com>
4. ***Years before Toronto van attack, Alek Minassian says he connected online with misogynistic radicals.*** News story about the 2018 mass killing of pedestrians in Toronto by a van driven onto the sidewalk. If one of the most challenging concepts for students to grasp from Chapter One is the multitude of ways in which individual choices are overdetermined by social causes, this story is a powerful example for them. In the article, Minassian discloses the degree to which his actions were influenced by his involvement in ‘incel’ culture. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-years-before-toronto-van-attack-alek-minassian-says-he-connected/?fbclid=IwAR22QYgiLn3-ahGDjTDikeqvOJMGcek4RNFL7zNQQlExnpd3LZbpBdf84w4>
5. ***Definition of the Sociological Imagination and Overview of the Book.*** A brief primer on the concept of the Sociological Imagination and its origin in the work of sociologist C. Wright Mills. <https://www.thoughtco.com/sociological-imagination-3026756>