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The Importance of Historical Context / Examining Social Relationships/
Asking Sociological Questions/ Social Structures and Forces/ The Sociological Perspective

Understanding the Sociological Perspective

Sociology can be defined as the study of society, but in practice, it is much more. It is a way of seeing the world through the evaluation of social structures and forces. This field of study uses historical context to examine the present day and a society that is constantly in flux. At its core, sociology fosters critical thinking, poses analytical questions, and pursues solutions. To truly grasp sociology and the research sociologists conduct, an understanding of social theory is necessary.

When sociologists examine the world in a bid to better understand it, they look for relationships between individuals and the social groups they belong to based on race, class, and gender, among others. They also consider people's ties to communities and institutions, be they religious, educational, or municipal, such as a church, school, or police department. In sociology, the individual aspects of social life are known as the "micro," and the large-scale groups, relationships, and trends that make up society are known as the "macro".

Sociologists look for relationships between the micro and macro to recommend ways to address the trends and problems that arise in society. The recognition that social structures and forces shape a person's beliefs, values, norms, and expectations lie at the heart of sociology. These forces influence our experiences, interactions with others, and ultimately, the outcomes of our lives.

While most people remain unaware of how social structures affect them, they are likely to recognize these forces while taking a critical look at society. Introducing students to the field, Peter Berger wrote, "It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem." Hence, the sociological perspective urges students to ask the unasked questions about "normal" things to illuminate the underlying social structures and forces at work.

Sociologists seek complex answers to what many would consider simple questions. Berger asserted that four key questions allow sociologists to see the connections between everyday life and the overarching social structure and forces that shape it. They are:

1. What are people doing with each other here?
2. What are their relationships to each other?
3. How are these relationships organized in institutions?
4. What are the collective ideas that move men and institutions?

Berger suggested that asking these questions transforms the familiar into something otherwise unseen, leading to "a transformation of consciousness." C. Wright Mills called this transformation "the sociological imagination." When individuals examine the world this way, they see how their present-day experiences and personal biographies sit within the trajectory of history. Using the sociological imagination to examine our own lives, we might question how social structures, forces, and relationships have given us certain privileges, like access to wealth and prestigious schools. We might also consider how social forces like racism might disadvantage us in comparison to others.

The sociological perspective always includes historical context, because if we want to understand why things are the way they are, we have to understand how they got there. So, sociologists often take the long view, looking at the shifting nature of the class structure over time, the evolution of the relationship between the economy and culture, and the limited access to rights and resources that continue to impact historically marginalized people today.

Mills believed that the sociological imagination could empower people to change their lives and society because it allows us to see perceived "personal troubles," like not making enough money to support ourselves, in context. Rather than personal problems, these troubles are "public issues," as they stem from social structure flaws such as inadequate wages.

The sociological imagination points to the crux of the sociological perspective—that society is a social product, and, as such, its structures and institutions are changeable. Just as social structures and forces shape our lives, our choices and actions influence the nature of society. Throughout our daily lives, our behavior either validates society or challenges it to improve. The sociological perspective allows us to see how both outcomes are possible.