

Chapter 1

Sociology: Perspective, Theory, and Method

Detailed Outline

I. The Sociological Perspective

Sociology is *the systematic study of human society*. At the heart of the discipline is a distinctive point of view called the “sociological perspective,” which involves a special kind of “vision”:

- A. Seeing the general in the particular
The sociological perspective helps us to see general social patterns in the behavior of particular individuals.
- B. Seeing the strange in the familiar
This perspective also encourages us to realize that society guides our thoughts and deeds.
- C. Seeing society in our everyday choices
Emile Durkheim’s research showed that the suicide rate was strongly influenced by the extent to which people were socially integrated with others.
- D. Seeing sociologically: marginality and crisis
The greater people’s social marginality, the better able they are to use the sociological perspective. Just as social change encourages sociological thinking, sociological thinking can bring about social change.

II. The Importance of a Global Perspective

- A. Sociologists also strive to see issues in **global perspective**, defined as *the study of the larger world and our society’s place in it*.
- B. There are three different types of nations in the world:
 - 1. The world’s **high-income countries** are *industrialized nations in which most people have relatively high incomes*.
 - 2. The world’s **middle-income countries** have *limited industrialization and moderate personal income*.
 - 3. The world’s **low-income countries** have *little industrialization and most people are poor*.
 - 4. Global thinking is an important component of the sociological perspective for four reasons:
 - a. Where we live makes a great difference in shaping our lives.
 - b. Societies the world over are increasingly interconnected, making traditional distinctions between “us” and “them” less and less valid.
 - c. Many human problems faced in the United States are far more serious elsewhere.
 - d. Thinking globally is a good way to learn more about ourselves.

III. Applying the Sociological Perspective

Applying the sociological perspective benefits us in many ways:

- A. Sociology and Public Policy
Sociologists have helped shape public policy.
- B. Sociology and Personal Growth
Using sociology benefits us in four distinct ways:
 1. The sociological perspective helps us assess the truth of “common sense.”
 2. The sociological perspective helps us assess both opportunities and constraints in our lives.
 3. The sociological perspective empowers us to be active participants in society.
 4. The sociological perspective helps us to live in a diverse world.
- C. Careers: The “Sociology Advantage”
The application of sociology is evident in the role that sociology has had in shaping public policy and law in many ways. A background in sociology is also good preparation for the working world. An increasing number of sociologists work in all sorts of applied fields.

IV. The Origins of Sociology

The birth of sociology resulted from powerful and complex social forces:

- A. Social Change And Sociology
Three major social changes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are important to the development of sociology:
 1. The rise of industrial technology
 2. The growth of cities
 3. Political change, including a rising concern with individual liberty and rights (e.g., the French revolution)
- B. Science and Sociology
Auguste Comte believed that the major goal of sociology was to understand society as it actually operates. Comte saw sociology as the product of a three-stage historical development:
 1. The theological stage, in which thought was guided by religion
 2. The metaphysical stage, a transitional phase
 3. The scientific stage
The scientific stage would be guided by **positivism**: *a scientific approach to knowledge based on “positive” facts as opposed to mere speculation.*

V. Sociological Theory

A **theory** is *a statement of how and why specific facts are related*. The goal of sociological theory is to explain social behavior in the real world. Theories are based on **theoretical approaches**, or *basic images of society that guides thinking and research*. Sociologists ask two basic questions: “What issues should we study?”, and “How should we connect the facts?” There are three major sociological approaches:

- A. The **structural-functional approach** is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. It asserts that our lives are guided by **social structures** (*relatively stable patterns of social behavior*). Each social structure has **social functions**, or consequences, for the operation of society as a whole. Key figures in the development of this approach include Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, and Talcott Parsons.
- Robert Merton introduced three concepts related to social function:
1. **manifest functions**, or *the recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern*
 2. **latent functions**, or *largely unrecognized and unintended consequences*
 3. **social dysfunctions**, or *undesirable consequences of a social pattern for the operation of society*
4. Critical Review: The influence of this approach has declined in recent decades. It focuses on stability, ignoring inequalities of social class, race, and gender.
- B. The **social-conflict approach** is a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality, generating conflict and change. Most sociologists who favor this approach attempt not only to understand society, but also to reduce social inequality. Karl Marx is always associated with this approach.
- C. Feminism and the gender-conflict approach. One important type of conflict analysis is the **gender-conflict approach**: *a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between men and women*. The gender-conflict approach is closely linked to **feminism**, *the advocacy of social equality for women and men*.
- D. The race-conflict approach. Another important type of social-conflict analysis is the **race-conflict approach**, *a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between people of different racial and ethnic categories*.
1. Critical Review: The various social conflict approaches have developed rapidly in recent years. They share several weaknesses:
 - a. They ignore social unity based on mutual interdependence and shared values.
 - b. Because they are explicitly political, they cannot claim scientific objectivity.
 - c. Like the structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approaches envision society in terms of broad abstractions.
- E. The **symbolic-interaction approach** is a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals. The structural-functional and the social-conflict approaches share a **macro-level orientation**, meaning that *they focus on broad social structures that shape society as a whole*. In contrast, symbolic-interactionism has a **micro-level orientation**; *it focuses on patterns of social interaction in specific settings*. Key figures in the development of this approach include Max Weber, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, George Homans, and Peter Blau.
- Critical Review: Symbolic interactionism attempts to explain more clearly how individuals actually experience society. However, it has two weaknesses:
1. Its micro-orientation sometimes results in the error of ignoring the influence of

larger social structures.

2. By emphasizing what is unique, it risks overlooking the effects of culture, class, gender, and race.

VI. Three Ways to Do Sociology

A. Scientific Sociology

One popular way to do sociological research is **positivist sociology**, which is *the study of society based on scientific observation of social behavior*.

1. Science

Scientific knowledge is based on empirical evidence, *meaning facts we verify with our senses*. Sociological research often challenges what we accept as “common sense.” For example:

- a. It is often believed that the differences in the social behavior of women and men reflect “human nature.” In fact, much of what we call “human nature” is constructed by the society in which we live.
- b. It is often thought that the United States is a middle-class society in which most people are more or less equal. In fact, the richest 5 percent of U.S. families control half of the country's wealth.
- c. Many believe that people marry for love. Sociological research indicates that marriages in most societies have little to do with love.

2. Concepts, variables, and measurement

A basic element of science is the **concept**, which is *a mental construct that represents some part of the world, inevitably in a simplified form*. **Variables** are *concepts whose value changes from case to case*.

Measurement is *the process of determining the value of a variable in a specific case*. Statistical measures are frequently used to describe populations as a whole, and this requires that researchers operationalize variables, which means specifying exactly what one is to measure in assigning a value to a variable.

3. Statistics

Sociologists use descriptive statistics to state what is “average” for a large population. Included in this category are mean, median, and mode.

4. Reliability and Validity

- a. Useful measurement must have **reliability**, which refers to *consistency in measurement*.
- b. Useful measurement must have **validity**, which refers to *precision in measuring exactly what one intends to measure*.

5. Correlation and Cause

The real payoff in sociological research is determining how variables are related. **Correlation** can be defined as *a relationship by which two (or more) variables change together*.

The scientific ideal is mapping out **cause and effect**, which means *a relationship in which we know that change in one variable causes a change in another*. Just because two variables change together does not necessarily mean that they have a cause-and-effect relationship. When two variables change together but neither one causes the other, sociologists describe the relationship

as a *spurious correlation*. To be sure of a real cause-and-effect relationship, we must show that:

- a. the two variables are correlated.
- b. the independent (or causal) variable precedes the dependent variable in time.
- c. there is no evidence that the correlation is spurious because of some third variable.

6. The Ideal of Objectivity

A guiding principle of scientific study is objectivity, or *personal neutrality in conducting research*. Whenever possible, sociologists follow Max Weber's model of value-free research. That is, we must be dedicated to finding truth *as it is* rather than as we think *it should be*.

B. Interpretative Sociology

Some sociologists suggest that science, as it is used to study the natural world, misses a vital part of the social world: meaning. Human beings do not simply act; we engage in *meaningful action*. Max Weber, who pioneered this framework, argued that the focus of sociology is interpretation. **Interpretative sociology** is *the study of society that focuses on the meanings people attach to their social world*. The interpretative sociologist's job is not just to observe what people do but to share in their world of meaning and come to appreciate why they act as they do.

C. Critical Sociology

1. The Importance of Change

Karl Marx founded this framework, rejecting the idea that society exists as a "natural" system with a fixed order. **Critical sociology** is *the study of society that focuses on the need for social change*. The point is not merely to study the world as it is, but to change it.

2. Sociology as Politics

Scientific sociologists object to taking sides, charging that critical sociology is political and gives up any claim to objectivity.

D. Methods and Theory

In general, each of the three ways to do sociology is related to one of the theoretical approaches presented earlier in the chapter.

VII. Research Orientations and Theory

Links between research orientations and theory

- A. Positivist orientation is linked to the structural-functional approach – both are concerned with the scientific goal of understanding society as it is
- B. Interpretive orientation is linked to the symbolic-interaction approach – both focus on the meanings people attach to their social world
- C. Critical orientation is linked to the social-conflict approach – both seek to reduce social inequality

VIII. Gender and Research

Research is affected by **gender**, *the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being female and male*, in five ways:

- A. Androcentricity, or *approaching an issue from the male perspective*.
- B. Overgeneralizing, or *using data drawn from studying only one sex to support conclusions about human behavior in general*.
- C. Gender blindness, or *not considering the variable of gender at all*.
- D. Double standards, or using different standards to judge men and women.
- E. Interference, because a subject reacts to the sex of the researcher.

IX. Research Ethics

The American Sociological Association—the professional organization of U.S. sociologists—has established formal guidelines for conducting research. Sociologists must strive to be technically competent and fair-minded in their work; ensure the safety of subjects taking part in a research project; include in their published findings any sources of financial support; and observe the global dimensions to research ethics.

X. Research Methods

A **research method** is *a systematic plan for conducting research*. Researchers choose a particular method according to those they wish to study and what they wish to learn.

A. Testing a Hypothesis: The Experiment

The **experiment** is *a research method for investigating cause-and-effect under highly controlled conditions*. Experiments test a specific hypothesis, that is, a statement of a possible relationship between two (or more) variables. Hypotheses are unverified statements of a relationship between variables. Experimenters gather the evidence needed to accept or reject the research hypothesis in three steps:

- measuring the dependent variable (the “effect”).
- exposing the dependent variable to the independent variable (the “cause” or “treatment”).
- measuring the dependent variable again to see if the predicted change took place.

1. Illustration of an Experiment: The “Stanford County Prison”

Phillip Zimbardo devised a fascinating experiment in which he tested the hypothesis that once inside a prison; even emotionally healthy people are prone to violence. The results supported Zimbardo’s hypothesis, but the experiment also revealed the potential of research to threaten the physical and mental well-being of subjects.

B. Asking Questions: Survey Research

A **survey** is *a research method in which subjects respond to a series of statements or questions in a questionnaire or an interview*. Survey research is usually descriptive rather than explanatory. Surveys are directed at populations, the people who are the focus of research. Usually we study a sample, a part of the population that represents the whole. Random sampling is commonly used to be sure that the sample is actually representative. Surveys may involve questionnaires, a series of written questions a researcher presents to subjects. Questionnaires may be closed-ended or open-ended. Most surveys are self-administered and must be carefully pretested. Surveys may also take the form of interviews, a series of questions administered in person by a researcher to

respondents.

1. Illustration of Survey Research: Studying the African American Elite

Sociologist Lois Benjamin used survey research to investigate the effects of racism on talented African American men and women. What surprised Benjamin the most was how eagerly many subjects responded to her request for an interview. Benjamin concluded that despite the improving social standing of African Americans, black people in the United States still suffer the effects of racial hostility.

C. In the Field: Participant Observation

Participant observation is *a method by which researchers systematically observe people while joining in their routine activities*. Participant observation research is descriptive and often exploratory.

1. Illustration of Participant Observation: “Street Corner Society”

William Foote Whyte studied social life in a rundown section of Boston he called “Cornerville.” Whyte entered the Cornerville world as a participant observer and actually married a local woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life in the process. He learned that the neighborhood was not the stereotypical slum. His work shows that participant observation is a method based on tensions and contrasts.

D. Using Available Data: Existing Sources

Not all research requires collecting new data. In many cases sociologists save time and money by using existing sources, analyzing data collected by others.

1. Illustration of the use of existing sources: A Tale of Two Cities

Digby Baltzell’s study of Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia illustrates the clever use of existing data. Baltzell’s investigation used scientific logic but it also illustrated the interpretive approach by showing how people understood their world. His research reminds us that sociological investigation often involves mixing methodological orientations and a lively sociological imagination.

XI: Putting It All Together: Ten Steps in Sociological Research

The following ten questions will guide you through a research project in sociology:

1. What is your topic?
2. What have others already learned?
3. What, exactly, are your questions?
4. What will you need to carry out research?
5. Are there ethical concerns?
6. What method will you use?
7. How will you record the data?
8. What does the data tell you?
9. What are your conclusions?
10. How can you share what you’ve learned?

Everyone, including sociologists, makes generalizations, but sociological generalizations differ from simple **stereotypes**, which are *exaggerated descriptions that are applied to every person in some category*.

Chapter Objectives

After they have read Chapter 1, students should be able to:

1. Define sociology and examine the components of the sociological perspective.
2. Explain the importance of a global perspective for sociology.
3. Identify and describe four benefits of using the sociological perspective.
4. Identify and discuss three social changes especially important to the development of sociology.
5. Discuss the importance of theory in sociology.
6. Summarize the main assumptions of the three major theoretical approaches in sociology.
7. Discuss the advantages of the scientific approach to knowing and examine how scientific evidence challenges our common sense.
8. Define concepts, variables, and measurement.
9. Distinguish between the concepts of reliability and validity.
10. Understand the distinction between cause-and-effect relationship and a correlational relationship.
11. Examine the ideal of objectivity in sociological research and discuss ways that researchers can be as objective as possible.
12. Summarize the three methodological approaches in sociology: scientific, interpretive, and critical.
13. Identify five ways in which gender-based issues may distort sociological research.
14. List ethical guidelines to follow in sociological research.
15. Summarize the four major methods by which sociologists conduct research and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each method.
16. Understand the basic logic of experimental research.
17. Outline the ten steps involved in carrying out sociological investigation.

Supplementary Lecture Material
Sociology and the Other Social Sciences

Sociology is only one of a number of interrelated ways of attempting to understand and account for human behavior.

Most earlier attempts were humanistic; that is, they were not guided by the principles of scientific methodology. Because they are predicated on relatively rigorous procedures for the gathering and assessment of empirical information, the social sciences provide a more satisfactory way to understand the causes of human behavior than do humanistic approaches, although the value of insights obtained through nonscientific methods should never be underestimated. Often such insights provide the starting point for scientific explorations.

Sociology is only one of a family of related social sciences. The following discussion examines the character of these other disciplines and explores sociology's relationship with each of them.

Psychology shares with sociology (and cultural anthropology) a broadly-based interest in understanding a wide variety of human behavior; the disciplines differ from each other in that psychology is principally concerned with the behavior of individuals, while sociologists more commonly study group behavior and the extent to which group membership (including factors such as race, class, and gender) influences individual behavior.

Psychology has both academic and applied branches. Applied psychology is a therapeutic effort to help people understand their own behavior and cope with their problems. Academic psychology is closer to the mainstream of sociology, placing its central emphasis on understanding such phenomena as learning, thinking, personality formation and functioning, intelligence, memory, and motivation. Academic psychology grew out of biology and is still strongly oriented toward experimental research. Some academic psychologists conduct research into animal behavior and the physiology of the brain, which is sharply distinct from sociological work; others concern themselves with very much the same sort of questions as those that interest sociologists, although always with special emphasis on individual behavior. The two fields meet in the subdiscipline of social psychology, which is commonly taught in both psychology and sociology curricula and which focuses on how human personality and behavior are influenced by an individual's social environment.

Anthropology, like psychology, has some concerns it shares with sociology but also studies some very different subjects. The two main subfields are physical anthropology and cultural anthropology, although some attention is also devoted to archeology and linguistics. Physical anthropology uses natural science research methods to study such topics as the biological evolution of the human race and the differences between the races. Cultural anthropology studies many of the same topics as does sociology, but there are two main differences between the fields: (1) anthropology tends to study small, preliterate, traditional societies, whereas most sociologists concentrate on modern industrial societies; (2) anthropology generally studies cultures as a whole, while sociology commonly studies smaller systems (for example, groups or institutions) within complex societies. However, sociology and cultural anthropology are closer

than the other social sciences. Furthermore, as the traditional societies that anthropologists have historically preferred to study have become increasingly scarce, more and more cultural anthropologists are studying such aspects of contemporary society as street gangs, immigrant life, and ethnic subcultures, which are indistinguishable from the subject matter usually studied by sociologists. Cultural anthropologists and sociologists use similar research methods, although anthropologists are more likely to develop elaborate descriptive ethnographies of the social scenes they observe by means of extended periods of participant observation, whereas sociologists more commonly collect narrower and more quantitative data using survey research methods.

Economics is a much more narrow and focused discipline than sociology, psychology, or anthropology, concerning itself with the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. Because economists restrict their attention to phenomena that can be precisely measured, such as interest rates, taxes, economic production rates, and unemployment, they have developed by far the most sophisticated statistical techniques for manipulating and presenting data of any of the social sciences. On the other hand, this precision may limit the ability of economists to deal effectively with the sorts of larger issues that many people find most interesting and important. Sociologists who study economic behavior, in contrast to economists, focus on the relationship between economics and other aspects of social reality—for example, on the way in which value orientations (such as support for the environmental movement) may affect consumption patterns, on the ways in which corporations are organized and changed, or on how human beings experience the world of work subjectively.

Political science, like economics, focuses on a relatively narrow segment of human social behavior, in this case the issues of power and authority. Traditionally, political science focused either on political philosophy or on relatively limited studies of the ways in which governments and political parties are organized and function. More recently, under the influence of the developing field of political sociology, political scientists have been increasingly interested in such topics as political socialization, the social forces influencing voting behavior, the structure of institutional and noninstitutional power in local communities, and the origin and development of movements of political protest, all of which are shared concerns with sociologists working in this area. The two disciplines use broadly similar research methods, with political scientists having played an especially important role in the development of opinion polling and related techniques of survey research.

Two additional disciplines deserve mention, though each is only marginally compatible with the basic definition of a social science.

History straddles the line between the humanities and the social sciences. Traditionally the field studied historical developments as unique events, not as examples of general categories or patterns. More recently, however, many historians have become more interested in the social forces that shape historical events and in developing theories of broad patterns of sociohistorical change; they also have begun using more quantitative and precise data. To the extent that these trends continue, history is moving in the direction of becoming a true social science.

Social work is comparable to applied psychology in that its central purpose is not to understand

human behavior but rather to help people, groups, and communities cope more effectively with their personal and social problems. Of course, it is essential to understand the causes of these problems, and social workers rely heavily on sociological and psychological research and theory, but the fundamental thrust of the field is different from that of sociology and academic psychology because of its practical orientation.

NOTE: The following Web link will be helpful to you in your consideration of sociology and the other social sciences: <http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/w3virtsoelib/>

Discussion Questions

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of humanistic and scientific approaches to understanding human behavior? Does the fact that poetry and drama are not scientific mean that we have nothing to learn from them?
2. Which of the social sciences strikes you as closest to sociology? Most distinct? Why?
3. Sociologists and political scientists both study political behavior. Sociologists and economists both study economic behavior. Is this simply duplication of effort, or do sociologists, with their characteristic perspectives, have the ability to develop insights that might not occur to their fellow social scientists?
4. Sociologists have in the past several decades developed and refined a specialization called applied sociology. Like applied psychology, it focuses on coping with problems rather than studying what causes those problems. In what ways can sociology contribute to the more effective resolution of social problems at the individual, group, and community levels? Should we promote development of this subdiscipline or would it be better left to the social workers?

Supplemental Lecture Material

The False God of Numbers

A *New York Times* article published in 1997 discussed the use—and misuse—of statistics in politics. An example of how numbers can be used to lead to oversimplified conclusions was former President Clinton's declaration that welfare reform has been a success since in 1997, 1.4 million people dropped off the welfare rolls nationwide. But, is welfare reform the only possible cause of such a decrease?

One problem is that the numbers do not necessarily prove that those who left welfare actually went to work. Some of the former welfare recipients might simply have slipped away into even deeper poverty and despondency. Also, how much of the drop can be attributed to a booming economy and very low unemployment rather than reforms? In other words, the statistics used show a correlation, not necessarily cause and effect.

New air quality standards must be enacted because they will prevent precisely 15,000 deaths a

year from respiration ailments. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Yet the problem is a thorny one. One might ask whether all those respiratory deaths are due only to air pollution. And what about the cost of new standards to industry? How will these affect the economy in the long run?

Here are a few other examples begging alternate explanations or further exploration:

Quality of life in the U.S. is diminishing since, according to a 1996 study, the average one-way commute now takes 40 seconds longer than it did in 1986.

High divorce rates attribute to the breakdown of the family and poorer conditions for children.

Because corporations seek to save money by laying off full-time employees, the number of people working part-time or on a contract basis has increased.

All in all, these questions are complex and multidimensional. It is not likely that one answer alone is sufficient. Yet politicians and the media often make it sound simple and straightforward.

NOTE: An excellent discussion of the misuse of statistics can be accessed through the following Web link: www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Misuse_of_statistics

Source

"Keeping Score: Big Social Changes Revive the False God of Numbers." *The New York Times* (August 17, 1997): 1 and 4.

Discussion Questions

1. What various elements of science are these statements violating?
2. Why would politicians be tempted to simplify statistics? How should social scientists handle statistics differently? In what way does their responsibility to society differ from that of politicians?
3. Name several alternative conclusions that might be drawn from the numbers quoted above.
4. **Activity:** Look through several newspapers for the statistics quoted there. Analyze them using scientific standards. Keep in mind such issues as the difference between cause and effect and correlation, sample size and population, and the way the study was conducted. Also consider interpretations of the data.

USING THE ASA JOURNAL *TEACHING SOCIOLOGY* IN YOUR CLASSROOM

How to introduce basic disciplinary concepts in an interesting and stimulating fashion is a

concern for all educators. Each chapter in this volume contains an installment like the one that follows, involving the use of the American Sociological Association journal, *Teaching Sociology*, in your classroom. Over the past 15 years a wide variety of articles have appeared in this publication, concerning creative techniques for discussing core sociological concepts.

Recently, for example, there has been a great deal of discussion concerning “The Core” in sociology curricula. The discussion of the “Core” in sociology is relevant to all introductory sociology courses. A number of interesting articles on this subject appear in the January, 2004 issue of *Teaching Sociology* (Vol. 32: 1-42).

Another very interesting technique in introducing sociological concepts, using popular music, is suggested by Benjamin D. Albers and Rebecca Bach: “Rockin’ Soc: Using Popular Music to Introduce Sociological Concepts,” *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 31, April, 2003: 237-245.

Regarding the discussion of theory, Allen Scarborough has proposed an interesting approach using active learning and online discussion: “Bringing Theory Closer to Home Through Active Learning and Online Discussions,” *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 32, April, 2004: 222-231.

Finally, the October, 1992 issue of *Teaching Sociology* (Vol. 20, No. 4) is entitled “GIFTS: A Special Issue, 20 Great Ideas for Teaching Sociology.” In this collection, a number of articles appear that are well-suited to your introductory course and the opening chapter in the Macionis text. For example, R. Marie Bricher has contributed an article entitled “Teaching Introductory Sociology: Using Aspects of the Classroom as Sociological Events” (pp. 270-275). Bricher points out that the college classroom can function as a “strategic research site,” as students apply sociological insights and grow in their ability to recognize “social facts.” Two articles deal with introducing students to the concept of the *sociological imagination*: John R. Brouillette and Ronny E. Turner’s “Creating the Sociological Imagination on the First Day of Class: The Social Construction of Deviance” (pp. 276-279), and Kathleen M. O’Flaherty’s “Introducing Students to the Concept of the Sociological Imagination: A Written Assignment” (pp. 326-328). Brouillette and Turner’s article offers unique suggestions for helping introductory students to understand sociology as a “way of seeing,” rather than with a body of information to be memorized and regurgitated on examinations. O’Flaherty’s article offers a student assignment that is designed to help students appreciate C. Wright Mills’s concept of the intersection between personal biography and history, as well as the sociological imagination.

Student Exercises – Society and Theory

1. *Grey’s Anatomy*, *House*, and *ER* are three very different television shows that focus on the lives of medical doctors, and each was a great media success. Pick one of the *components of the sociological perspective* identified in Chapter 1 and apply it to the following exercise.

First, select two of these television shows and watch an episode of each. During your viewing of the shows identify the qualities that you think make each so appealing to television audiences. Secondly, address the following questions: What qualities do the shows share in common? What qualities are unique to each? Finally, get together with fellow class members in groups of 4-5 and compare your responses. Put together a composite of the lists that each of the group members wrote. Discuss your findings to the entire class.

2. Emile Durkheim did extensive research on suicide during the latter part of the nineteenth century. His theory as to why people commit suicide focuses on the condition of *social cohesion* present in a society and experienced by the individual. Go to www.census.gov/ and click on a link to health statistics in the United States. See if you can find data that supports Durkheim’s theory.

3. In the “Controversy and Debate” box (p. 31), the issue of whether sociology is nothing more than stereotypes is raised. Go to the library and locate a major sociology journal, such as *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Sociological Focus*, or the *American Journal of Sociology*. Thumb through a few recent issues of the journal and locate an article that is on a topic of interest to you. After reading the article, summarize in a two-page paper how the information provided in the article supports the three reasons sociology is not about creating stereotypes. If available, use your campus online search engine (Infotrac, EBSCO, etc.) to locate a source.

Student Exercises - Method

1. Here is an interesting site for you to check out. Go to the Web Center for Social Research Methods at www.socialresearchmethods.net and click on “Selecting Statistics.” Click on the concept on each page that corresponds to the type of variable or statistics you are interested in for your research. We hope you find this site useful.

2. An even more intriguing website is found at www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/proj/res_meth. Click through the site to enter the “Lab” and have some fun learning about five different research methods used in the social and behavioral science.

3. Locate a copy of the book *More Damned Lies and Statistics* by Joel Best. The author of this book argues that all statistics are “social product” and that one cannot understand a statistic unless something is known about the process through which it was constructed. Pick one of the book’s chapters—“Magic Numbers,” “Confusing Numbers,” “Scary Numbers” etc.—and write a two page summary of the examples and insights found therein.

4. Find a recent issue of *Time* or *Newsweek* and locate a graph or figure in one of the

articles that you can analyze using the information presented in the “Controversy and Debate” box entitled “Can People Lie with Statistics?” Make a copy of the figure or graph and bring it to class to discuss in a small group of students who have also brought in a graph or figure. Have a group member summarize for the class what you discovered.

5. Do a statistical analysis of your friends on Facebook. Take a sample of your friends and determine the mean and median for two of the following variables: number of albums, number of pictures, number of groups, number of wall posts on a given day, and number of friends whose Facebook profile picture is not of her or himself. How different are the mean and median from each other? Another idea is to do “content analysis” of the lists of favorite movies, books, and quotes for your friends on Facebook. Compare the patterns you find for male friends and for female friends. Or, compare friends who are freshmen to those who are seniors, or friends who have graduated from college and those who are still attending college.

6. The war in Iraq is obviously a very important social issue. In a group of three-to-five people, construct a five-question questionnaire using Likert-type response options (strongly-agree to strongly-disagree). Compare your group's questionnaire to that of other groups in the class and discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of each group's questionnaire.

7. What are the guidelines for doing research with human subjects at your college or university? Find a copy (perhaps on your college or university's website) of the formal Institutional Review Board's guidelines. Write a two-page paper summarizing the basic process involved in doing research with human subjects.

8. In his book *The Culture of Fear*, Barry Glasner raises some intriguing points, and provides very compelling statistics, that suggest Americans are afraid of the wrong things. Select a chapter in this book, perhaps the one on fear of flying or the one concerning the fear of black men, and write a two-page summary of the data and conclusions drawn by the author. Can you find other “existing sources” of information in support of the author's claims? Can you find evidence that contradicts his claims?

9. Go to the website of the *American Sociological Association* at www.asanet.org and click on the “About ASA” tab and select “Professional Ethics” from the drop down menu. Select one of the “General Principles” (A-E) and write a reflection on how you interpret what that principle means. In class, get together with other students who selected the same principle and compare your reflections. Report to the class what your group discovered.

10. Develop a ten-question survey questionnaire concerning some specific topic regarding family life (discipline practices used by parents, amount and type of contact with extended family members, gender roles in the home, etc.) Next, get together with three other students in the class and select one of the questionnaires to work on further. Spend one hour as a group refining the questionnaire. Submit this questionnaire along with the first questionnaire each of you did to your professor.