

Unit 1 – What is sociology?

Podcast text

Hello everyone, and welcome to Sociology 1101, Principles of Sociology. This course is intended to be a broad introduction to the discipline of sociology. My name is Nathan Young, and I'm a professor of sociology at the University of Ottawa. For today's podcast, we will be asking "what is sociology"? What is it about? What does it study? What do sociologists do? This discussion will serve as a background for the rest of the course.

Sociology is a very broad discipline that can be defined in several different ways. At the broadest level, sociology is the study of **society**. While most people have a general idea of what society is, it's something that is difficult to visualize or define. For most people, society is something that we know is there but that we don't think about very often. We know that societies have rules and expectations, but it's not always clear where these rules and expectations are coming from. Society is a thing that is bigger than us, that constrains us and guides us, but it's not something we can easily observe.

In sociological terms, then, society is what is called "a concrete abstraction". It is *abstract* because it's not something that we can see, hear, touch, taste or smell. In a discipline like biology, scientists can physically manipulate a cell, protein, or tissue and then observe what happens. Sociologists don't have that luxury because the thing we study can't be confined to the laboratory. At the same time, society is *concrete* because even if we can't see it, it's still real. Even though we can't see it, it still affects people's lives. Poverty, for instance, isn't something that just happens. It is produced by the choices we have collectively made about how to organize our economy, our housing, our labour market, our education system, and our social services. The categories "rich" and "poor" don't mean anything in the animal kingdom, or in the biology lab – but they do mean a lot in the human world. They are creations of society, and that's what sociologists study.

Sociology is based on a few key observations about people and their behaviours. The first observation is that people are **social animals**. Like many other animals in the natural world, people have a deep biological need to be together. This makes evolutionary sense when you consider the unique traits of human beings. We are not a particularly strong species (we are actually among the weakest in terms of muscular force for body mass), we do not have claws or teeth for hunting or self-defence, and we are woefully slow on our feet. What we do have, though, is the capacity to think and to communicate and thus coordinate our actions. While it is very difficult for a single human being to survive on his or her own, in a coordinated group we are formidable. This ability to coordinate has allowed us to build things that are much larger than ourselves, including laws, customs, cultures, and nations.

This leads us to the second observation: that *a person* and *people* are not the same thing. A person is a coherent, individual thinking being, and is usually studied through the discipline of

psychology. “People,” by contrast, is a different category entirely. A lot of the things that we can observe at the level of the individual – like a personality – is not really observable at the level of a group or a nation. We also know that people behave differently in a group than they do on their own. People who are involved in crowds, riots, and mobs – or alternatively on sports teams, street gangs, and cliques – behave differently than they would in private. To understand this, sociologists borrow a term from chemistry called **emergent properties**. Emergent properties refer to the characteristics that result or emerge from the combination of elements. Consider, for example, what happens when you combine hydrogen and oxygen (both of which are gases), you get water; or when you combine sodium and chlorine (both of which are toxic) you get sodium chloride, better known as table salt. An emergent property cannot be predicted by the individual elements that are combined, and sociologists make the same observation about people. A group has its own characteristics that are not reducible – or predictable – by the characteristics of the people who populate it. In society, we have things like language, culture, organizations, and economies that cannot be reduced to or boiled down to the individual level – they exist only when people come together. Therefore the clearest way to articulate the subject matter of sociology – the science of society – is the question: “what happens when people come together”? If we look across the globe, we see that there is both consistency and difference. All societies have things like language, culture, religions, institutions, power imbalances, and governments. However, the *form* that these take are very different. That’s the mission of sociology – trying to understand both the consistency and the variety of human social organization.

The third observation is that emergent properties have both huge benefits and significant costs. By coordinating our activities, people can do things that no individual person can do. Together, we build cities, schools, hospitals, industries, and infrastructure. Coordinating our efforts also frees people to do specialized things. Imagine what your day would look like if you had to forage for your own food and water on a daily basis. There wouldn’t be much time for things like school, recreation, and entertainment. Only 3% of Canada’s labour force works in agriculture, but this 3% frees people to become doctors, engineers, and intellectuals. At the same time, though, emergent properties have a dark side. All human groups have boundaries, which means that by definition they exclude other people. People who hold a shared culture and identity are often wary of outsiders or people who are “not like them”. People who have different language, culture, religion, or skin colour have a difficult time being accepted as members of a nation or society, and can find themselves persecuted by it – denied opportunities for good jobs, access to services, or even personal safety. In other words, emergent properties are not universally good – they tend to *privilege* some people while *discriminating* against others. Sociology looks at both things – the good and the bad in society.

To recap, sociology is a very broad discipline that looks at many different fields and questions. It begins from the perspective that human beings are more than just individuals – we create and do things when we come together that are not possible for one person alone. Sociology looks at

the benefits of social coordination, as well as their dark side, which is especially important for people who are marginalized, excluded, or lack power. As we will see in future units, sociology offers many different theoretical and methodological tools to investigate this “concrete abstraction” we call society. I hope you enjoy the course!