

## Unit 2 – Studying society

### Podcast text

Hello, and welcome to the Podcast for Unit 2 of SOC 1101, Principles of Sociology. In the last podcast, we briefly reviewed what sociology is, and saw that, in the most general terms, sociology is the study of society. The subject for today, then, is “what is society,” and how on Earth could we possibly study it?

First of all, society is more than just a bunch of people. As we saw last time, when people come together they create “emergent properties”, which are characteristics that do not exist at the level of the individual. For example, when people form groups they adopt roles – leaders, followers, class clowns – or alternatively mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers – that do not exist or make much sense if we consider the individual alone.

Society is also what we will call a “concrete abstraction”. It is an abstraction because society is not something that we can directly observe. It cannot be seen, felt, heard, or touched. At the same time, though, it is real – we know this because we can observe its impacts on people. Every time we observe a difference in cross-cultural behaviour, for instance, we are observing the impacts of society.

To conceptualize society, we will rely on two key ideas. The first idea is that “societies are the product of human interactions”. This means that everything that surrounds us – including organizations, governments, cities, laws, technologies, schools, and hospitals – have been produced collectively. No individual is capable of creating these things, they had to be produced by coordinated efforts. This doesn’t mean, though, that people always agree on what to build and how it should be built. Law, for instance, is a collective effort, but not always a fair one. Historically, women and minorities have been targeted by unfair laws that denied them the ability to own property, participate in politics, or receive an education (these kinds of laws are still in practice in many parts of the world). Here in Canada, it can still be argued that youth are targeted unfairly by law, as youthful activities such as loitering and soft drug use are often banned. This shows us that societies are built on two types of things: consensus (when people agree on a rule or a plan), and power imbalances (when a more powerful group can impose its will on a less powerful one). Power imbalances often involve conflict, and we will be discussing this at length in later units. Both consensus and conflict “create” society.

The second idea is that “while people create societies, societies are autonomous from any one person”. This means that society has a life of its own beyond the control of any one individual. Societies are “self-perpetuating”. By this, we mean that societies reproduce themselves. Think of an institution like “the government”. If we compare the government of today (2012), with the government in, say, 1970, we see that none of the individuals are the same. All of the members

of Parliament, and also all of the civil servants, are different. And yet, the government looks largely the same today as it did in 1970. Why? While the individuals have changed, the **roles** have remained pretty much unchanged. We still have a Prime Minister and Ministers, and Deputy Ministers and Directors, and so on, and they all do pretty much the same jobs as their forebearers did. Thinking about it more broadly, being a boss or an employee or a student or a mother or a brother is pretty much the same for you as it was for parents and grandparents. The point is that society is not re-invented with each generation – it reproduces itself by, among other things, assigning roles to people that they then follow.

Society is also “self-enforcing”, which means that it enforces behaviours. The most immediate way it does this is through laws, but this is not the only way. Law in fact only covers a fraction of possible human behaviours – usually controlling for the most extreme possible behaviours. Think, though, of all the rules you follow when you are waiting in line for something. Every adult in Canada knows that there is an “unwritten code” for waiting in line. This code regulates how people line up, how much personal space should be given to the person in front of you, how loud you can talk, and who gets to “cut in” to line. For example, it’s OK for someone to hold a place in line for you if you need to go to the bathroom, but it’s not OK for someone to show up late, recognize a friend, and join them at the front of the line. When these rules are broken, we notice immediately. More than this, people will enforce these rules by staring at rule-breakers, sighing loudly, or speaking up. The vast majority of us follow the rules to avoid embarrassment, even if we’re in a great hurry. That’s what we mean by society being “self-enforcing” – it enrolls each one of us in rule enforcement.

Therefore, a more precise definition of sociology would be “the study of individuals and their behaviour in the context of society and its forces”. Sociologists look at society as a “two-way street”. On the one hand, we create society and its features. On the other hand, society has a coercive impact on us.

Studying society is not easy, but one of the best tools that sociologists use is to “try to see the strange in the familiar”. This essentially means conducting a mental experiment, where we try to look at something that we know very well – something familiar – and try to make it appear strange or unfamiliar. Let me use an example that you will all be familiar with – schooling. By the time we are full-fledged adults, most people in Canada will have spent 15-20 years of their young lives in school. Governments spend enormous amounts of money on education, and this is one of the biggest investments of time that you will ever make. Schooling is also extremely popular, and most people would agree that it is a good thing to send children to school. Let’s, for a moment, make this strange. Let’s pretend that we are an alien species looking down on the world, and let’s ask: “Why do they do this?” What is the function of education?

It turns out the answer is more complicated than it first seems. On the surface, we can agree that schooling serves to educate children – it gives them the gift of knowledge that helps them to develop. We can also agree that schooling helps to prepare children for the job market by giving them skills that they will need. Let's go a bit deeper than that. Schooling creates and maintains an enormous economy – employing hundreds of thousands of teachers, administrators, janitors and school bus drivers (not to mention university professors!) so it clearly has a direct economic role. Schools also care for children during the prime working hours of the day, thus liberating their parents to work. It is no accident that mass education became a policy priority during the Industrial Revolution. When most people lived on farms, children worked alongside their parents close to their homes. The Industrial Revolution brought people into cities, and separated work from home, and therefore created a child care problem. Schools to the rescue! Schools also teach children how to submit to authority. Children are taught to follow institutional rules, to sit quietly and take instruction, to not distract each other or horse around, and to complete high quality work on time. This prepares them to be compliant workers in the future. Schools also serve the purpose of separating winners from losers. Schools can be understood as giant sorting machines – they create A students, but they also create C, D, and F students. Ours is a society that needs lawyers, doctors, and professors – but also janitors, cleaners, and minimum wage workers. Schools create both categories of future workers, and provide a ready-made explanation for success or failure – that each child had a chance and if they blew it, they just weren't smart enough – regardless of what the reality might be.

Studying society means looking for these types of deeper explanations for “why the world looks the way that it does”. Often, the explanations are more complex than they first appear. By asking why do we do this, and what purpose does it serve, we get a better understanding of the major institutions that make up society.