What Does Society Look Like

Society is something that can’t be seen or held so it is hard to describe. It is often described as sui generis – an object in itself. When you make it an object you can study and analyze it like any other object. However the problem is that there are many aspects to society such as race and culture that are often objects themselves.

For our purposes, we will be looking at the social processes that everyone experiences and how those social processes create the larger society of which we are all a part of. So we will be looking at the different parts – how they are created, changed, and maintained, though they link together, how they shape and influence one another and what our roles are in those processes.

Since we are members of society, we are all “natural sociologists”. We already possess a great deal of background knowledge to help us form ideas about the way the world works. We consider ourselves experts in the area of life in society, but this is true only on a small scale. What we know is based on personal experience. The problem is that we often take our personal experience and mix it with general background knowledge, guesswork, and blind faith. This is why sociology can be difficult. It requires us to ignore our preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs about the way things are. As sociologists, we need to learn to question everything – especially our take for granted notions about others.

What is Sociology?

Based on its roots, it means the study of society. To expand on that – it’s a systematic or scientific study of human society and social behavior. Howard Becker looks at it as the study of people “doing things together” This helps us remember that neither society nor the individual does stuff in isolation. Humans are essentially social beings – our survival is based on us living in various groups and our sense of self comes from membership in a society.

To understand a little better you need to compare it to the other social sciences –

* Like history it compares the past and present in order t understand both, unlike history - is more likely to focus on contemporary society.
* Anthropology concentrates on traditional or primitive cultures, while this looks at all levels of development
* Economics or political science focuses on a single social institution, while sociology looks at all of them
* Geography looks at the relationship of people to places, but geography is more concerned with the places, while sociology is more concerned with the relationships
* Communication looks at either the interpersonal or social levels, while sociology looks at both.
* Psychology specializes in internal states of mind while sociology looks at the individual in relationship to external social forces.

Levels of Analysis

There are different ways to approach sociology micro or macro

Micro – like a zoom lens. Looks at the intricate details. This focuses on the interactions between individuals and the ways in which those interactions construct the larger patterns, processes, and institutions of society. It looks at the smallest building blocks in order to understand its large scale structure.

Macro – like a wide angle lens looks at the bigger picture. This looks at large scale social structures in order to determine how it affects the lives of groups and individuals.

Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

As with the levels of analysis, there are also different aspects to the methodology or the process of gathering information.

* Quantitative research works with numerical data. They translate the social world into numbers that can be manipulated mathematically. An example would be a social statistic. They break down large amounts of information into numbers that are more easily communicated to others.
* Qualitative research works with non numerical data such as texts, written field notes, interviews, photos, and tape recordings. They preserve the details of the cases they study. There are several ways in which this occurs – participation observation – enter the social world they wish to observe. In depth interviews, analyze transcripts of conversations; glean date from historical books, letters, or diaries, or use photos or videos in their investigations. They use interpretive rather than statistical analysis.

The Sociological Perspective

In basic terms – this is taking a sociological approach or thinking sociologically – looking at the world in a unique way and seeing it in a whole new life.

One aspect of this is the sociological imagination which is “ability to understand the intersection between biography and history” or the interplay of self and the world. This is sociology’s task and its promise. Generally when we have a problem, we look at a psychological argument to explain why things are – large credit card debt = lack of self control. A sociological reasoning however would focus on the societal norms that promote a lifestyle beyond most people’s means. The sociological imagination requires us to find the link between micro and macro forces. How do larger social forces such as race, class, gender, religion, economics, or politics are involved in creating the contest of a person’s life.

The sociological imagination helps us appreciate different viewpoints and understand how they may have come about. Which allows us to understand better how we developed our own values, beliefs, and attitudes.

Sociological perspective does not deny individual responsibility, or rationalization or justification. It just gives us a broader context for understanding people and situations.

Culture Shock

This is one way to obtain a sociological perspective by attempting to create in ourselves a sense of culture shock. This term is used by anthropologists to describe the experience of visiting an exotic foreign culture. The original interaction seems so strange that we feel disorientated and doubt our ability to make sense of things. This can be very useful though, we lack an understanding of our surroundings, and we are able to truly perceive what is right in front of our eyes. Sociologists try to create this effect, without moving geographically. When we do this we become curious about our own lives. Things that are familiar to us if seen through an outsider’s perspective are just as exotic as a foreign country – think TV show LOST

Beginner’s Mind

This is another way to obtain SP. This was suggested by Bernard McGrane who said we should practice the beginner’s mind. To better understand the world, we must defamiliarize ourselves with it, or unlearn it what we already know. Beginner’s mind approaches the world without knowing in advance what it will find; it is open and receptive to experience. Discovery isn’t seeing of a new thing – but rather a new way of seeing things. One way to achieve this is by being present in the moment. We need to find inner stillness, stop our normal mental chatter then there is a possibility for true learning to occur.

Sociology in Everyday Life

We are every day actors – we approach our social world with “reciped” or practical knowledge that allows us to get by in our everyday world. But sometimes the practical knowledge isn’t as comprehensive as it should be – take the phone. We know how to use it, but do we know how it works? A social analysis however needs to have an approach to the world that creates a systematic, comprehensive, coherent, clear and consistent. This is very different than the everyday actor. Everything that seems unquestionable needs to be questioned. They have to take the perspective of a stranger in the social world – she seeks out and tries to verify what the everyday actor might just accept as truth. There are pros and cons to both views. The analyst sees with clarity what the actor glosses over, but the actor understands implicitly what the analyst must labor to grasp.

Contemporary American Society

Along with looking at everyday life, we will also look at contemporary American society. One reason is because it is immediate so more relevant and interesting. A comparative approach will be used when necessary to determine how we got to where we are today.

We will also be looking at American society. American culture is referred to as “modern social experiment. Different ideas are born, old ways are discarded or transformed and innovation takes hold.

United States is Global Perspective

The United States is closely related to the interactions of the rest of the world. Not all Americans appreciate or understand our interconnectivity with the rest of the world and prefer to see us as isolated and some see us as so powerful that we don’t need anyone else. On a macro level we can look at things such as international diplomacy, treaties, trade agreements, currencies, and transnational corporations to understand how our fates are interrelated. On a micro level we are increasingly exposed to other cultures – yoga, sushi, reggae music and American culture is spread also.

Communication and Media has also made us a very global world. The TV is like the camp fire of yester years. TV allows us to feel apart of something that is happening all around the world.

The Mass Media and Popular Culture

Mass media are forms of communication that deliver a message from one sender to numerous receivers. Interactive media is blurring the lines between what we once considered mass communication and interpersonal communication. Popular culture is also a word that is hard to describe. It can be defined as culture of the people, culture that is well liked by many, folk or mass culture as opposed to high culture, culture with a commercial purpose and so on. Even if we are not technically savvy, we all use forms of mass media from an iPod to a DVR. As the exposure grows, so does the influence. Mass media intersects with every level of social structure and connects us to the global village. On a personal level they affect the way we think, feel, and interact and as a result, how we interpret or perceive the world around us.