

# Sociological perspective essay sample

[Sociology](#)



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BUSTER**

- \* Sociology offers a perspective that stresses the social contexts in which people live and how these contexts influence people's lives. For C. Wright Mills, this is the interaction of biography and history.
- \* Sociology is the scientific study of society and human behavior, and, as such, is one of the social sciences, which study human behavior, in contrast to the natural sciences, which focus on nature.
- \* Sociology is different from the other social sciences because sociology focuses primarily on industrialized societies, does not look at only a single social institution, and focuses on factors external to the individual.
- \* Sociology emerged during the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. Early sociologists such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Harriet Martineau focused on how the sweeping social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution affected human behavior.
- \* Sociologists agree that sociological research should be value free but disagree concerning the proper purposes and uses of social research. Some believe its purpose should be only to advance understanding of human behavior; others feel that its goal should be to reform harmful social arrangements.
- \* Weber believed that sociologists must try to see the world from another's perspective in order to understand their behavior (Verstehen); Durkheim stressed the importance of uncovering the objective social conditions that influence behavior (social facts).

- \* In the early years of sociology, only a few wealthy women received an advanced education. Harriet Martineau was an Englishwoman who wrote about social life in Great Britain and the United States and published a book entitled *Society in America*.
- \* In North America, departments of sociology began to be established at the end of the nineteenth century. In the early years, the contributions of women and minorities were largely ignored.
- \* Pure sociology is research whose only purpose is to make discoveries, while applied sociology is the use of sociology to solve social problems in settings ranging from the work place to the family.
- \* A tension between social reform and social analysis has always run through sociology. The American Sociological Association is promoting public sociology to make politicians more aware of the sociological perspective.
- \* Globalization is also leaving its mark on sociology and will likely direct sociologists to give greater consideration to global issues.

## I. The Sociological Perspective

A. This perspective is important because it provides a different way of looking at familiar worlds. It allows us to gain a new vision of social life.

B. This perspective stresses the broader social context of behavior by looking at individuals' social location—employment, income, education, gender, age, and race— and by considering an individual's external influences and experiences. We are able to see the links between what people do and the

social settings that shape their behavior. C. This perspective enables us to analyze and understand both the forces that contribute to the emergence and growth of the global village and our unique experiences in our own smaller corners of this village.

## II. Sociology and the Other Sciences

A. Science is the systematic methods used to obtain knowledge and the knowledge obtained by those methods. It can be divided into the natural sciences and the social sciences. Sociology is defined as “ the scientific study of society and human behavior.”

B. The natural sciences attempt to comprehend, explain, and predict events in our natural environment.

C. Social sciences attempt to objectively study the social world. Like the natural sciences, the social sciences are divided into specialized fields based on their subject matter. \* Anthropology attempts to understand culture (a people’s total way of life) by focusing primarily on tribal people. This is giving way, though, to study of groups in industrialized settings. \* Economics analyzes the production, distribution, and allocation of the material goods and services of a society. \* Political science focuses on politics or government.

\* Psychology concentrates on processes that occur within the individual. \* Sociology is similar to the other social sciences in some ways, but it is distinct because it looks at all social institutions, focuses on industrialized societies, and looks at external factors which influence people.

D. All sciences have certain goals.

\* The first goal is to explain why something happens.

\* The second goal is to make generalizations by looking for patterns, recurring characteristics, or events. \* The third goal is to predict what will happen in the future, given current knowledge.

E. To achieve these goals, scientists must move beyond common sense and rely on conclusions based on systematic study.

### III. The Origins of Sociology

A. Sociology developed in the middle of the nineteenth century when European social observers began to use scientific methods to test their ideas. The following four factors led to its development: \* The social upheaval in Europe as a result of the Industrial Revolution, which led to changes in the way people, lived their lives; \* The political revolutions in America and France, which encouraged people to rethink their ideas about social life; \* The development of imperialism—as the Europeans conquered other nations, they came in contact with different cultures and began to ask why cultures varied; \* The success of the natural sciences, which created a desire to apply scientific methods in order to find answers for the questions being raised about the social world.

B. Auguste Comte coined the term “ sociology” and suggested the use of positivism—applying the scientific approach to the social world—but he did not utilize this approach himself.

C. Herbert Spencer viewed societies as evolutionary, coined the term “ the survival of the fittest,” and became known for social Darwinism. Spencer was convinced that no one should intervene in the evolution of society and that attempts at social reform were wrong.

D. Karl Marx, whose ideas about social classes and class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was the foundation of the conflict perspective, believed that class conflict was the key to human history. Marx believed that the conflict and struggle would end only with a revolution by the working class.

E. Emile Durkheim played an important role in the development of sociology.

\* One of his primary goals was to get sociology recognized as a separate academic discipline. \* He was interested in understanding the social factors that influence individual behavior; he studied suicide rates among different groups and concluded that social integration—the degree to which people are tied to their social group—was a key social factor in suicide. \* Durkheim’s third concern was that social research be practical; sociologists should not only diagnose the causes of social problems but should also develop solutions for them.

F. Max Weber was one of the most influential of all sociologists, raising issues that remain controversial even today. Disagreeing with Karl Marx, Weber defined religion as a central force in social change (i. e., Protestantism encourages greater economic development and was the central factor in the rise of capitalism in some countries). \* The Protestant belief system encouraged its members to embrace change. \* Protestants sought “ signs”

that they were in God's will; financial success became a major sign. The more money they made, the more secure they were about their religious standing. \* Weber called this behavior the Protestant ethic; he called their readiness to invest capital in order to make more money the spirit of capitalism.

#### IV. Values in Sociological Research

A. Weber advocated that sociological research should be value free (personal values or biases should not influence social research) and objective (totally neutral). \* Sociologists agree that objectivity is a proper goal, but they acknowledge that no one can escape values entirely. \* Replication is when a study is repeated to see if the same results are found. It is one means to avoid the distortions that values can cause.

B. Although sociologists may agree that research should be objective, the proper purposes and uses of sociology are argued among sociologists, with some taking the position that the proper role of sociology is to advance understanding of social life, while others believe that it is the responsibility of sociologists to explore harmful social arrangements of society.

#### V. Verstehen and Social Facts

A. Weber argued that sociologists should use Verstehen ("to grasp by insight") in order to see beyond the social facts to the subjective meanings that people attach to their own behavior.

B. Durkheim believed that social facts, patterns of behavior that characterize a social group, reflect underlying conditions of society, and should be used to interpret other social facts.

C. Social facts and Verstehen fit together because they reinforce each other; sociologists use Verstehen to interpret social facts.

## VI. Sexism in Early Sociology

A. In the early years of sociology, the field was dominated by men because rigidly defined social roles prevented most women from pursuing an education. \* Women were supposed to devote themselves to the four K's: Kirche, Küchen, Kinder, und Kleider (church, cooking, children, and clothes). \* At the same time, a few women from wealthy families managed to get an education; a few even studied sociology, although the sexism in the universities stopped them from earning advanced degrees, becoming professors, or having their research recognized.

B. Harriet Martineau studied social life in both Great Britain and the United States, publishing *Society in America* decades before Durkheim and Weber were even born.

## VII. Sociology in North America

A. The first departments of sociology in the United States were at the University of Kansas (1892), Atlanta University (1897), and the University of Chicago (1899); the first in Canada was at McGill University (1922). \* Albion Small, founder of the department of sociology at the University of Chicago,



also established the American Journal of Sociology. \* The department of sociology at the University of Chicago dominated North American sociology.

B. The situation of women in North America was similar to that of European women, and their contributions to sociology met a similar fate. \* Now that women have had more of a voice in sociology, history is being rewritten. The contributions of female sociologists are starting to be acknowledged.

C. African American professionals also faced problems.

\* W. E. B. Du Bois was the first African American to earn a Ph. D. from Harvard. He conducted extensive research on race relations in the United States, publishing one book a year on this subject between 1896 and 1914. \* Despite his accomplishments, he encountered prejudice and discrimination in his professional and personal life. \* Until recently, his contributions to sociology were overlooked.

D. Jane Addams is an example of a sociologist who was able to combine the role of sociologist with that of social reformer. \* In 1889, she founded Hull House, a settlement house for the poor, and worked to bridge the gap between the powerful and powerless. \* Sociologists from nearby University of Chicago visited Hull House frequently. \* She is the only sociologist to have won the Nobel Peace Prize; she was awarded this prize in 1931.

E. Many early North American sociologists combined the role of sociologist with that of social reformer. \* Talcott Parsons developed abstract models of society to show how the parts of society harmoniously work together. \* Countering this development was C. Wright Mills, who urged sociologists to

get back to social reform. He saw the emergency of the power elite as an imminent threat to freedom.

F. The debate over what should be the proper goals of sociological analysis—analyzing society vs. reforming society—continues today. \* Applied sociology exists between these two extremes. One of the first attempts at applied sociology was the founding of the NAACP. \* Today, applied sociologists work in a variety of settings, from business and hi-tech organizations to government and not-for-profit agencies. \* Applied sociology is the application of sociological knowledge in some specific setting, rather than an attempt to rebuild society. Both sociologists who focus on social reform and those who emphasize basic sociology reject applied sociology.

### VIII. Trends Shaping the Future of Sociology

A. To understand the tension between social reform and social analysis, sociologists have found it useful to divide the development of sociology into three phases. \* In the first phase, the primary concern of sociologists was making the world a better place. \* During the second phase, from the 1920s until World War II, sociologists sought to establish sociology as a respected field of knowledge, emphasizing basic, or pure, sociology. \* In the third (current) phase, there has been an attempt to merge sociological knowledge and practical work with the development of applied sociology. This trend has gained momentum in recent years. \* The American Sociological Association (ASA) is promoting public sociology. The ASA wants the public, especially politicians and policy makers, to make use of sociological data in order to better understand how society works.

B. Globalization is a second major trend destined to leave its mark on sociology. \* Globalization is the breaking down of national boundaries because of advances in communications, trade, and travel. \* Globalization is likely to broaden the scope of sociological analysis as sociologists look beyond the boundaries of the United States in considering global issues.

C. Globalization is one of the most significant events in world history. This book stresses the impact of globalization on our lives today.

Short Answer Questions:

1)What is social location?

Answer: the group memberships that people have because of their location in history and society

2)In addressing the sociological perspective, what did C. Wright Mills mean by “ history”? Answer: Each society is located in a broad stream of events, giving it specific characteristics, values, and norms.

3)The social science closely related to sociology, which traditionally focuses on the study of tribal peoples, is called \_\_\_\_\_.

Answer: anthropology

4)What is the primary difference between the social and natural sciences?

Answer: The social sciences objectively examine human relationships and the social world. The natural sciences objectively observe and explore the world of nature and its lawful relationships.

5)The two goals of a scientific discipline are to \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. Answer: explain why something happens; make generalizations that can be applied to a broader group

6)The prevailing ideas in society, the things that “ everyone knows” as true, are collectively referred to as \_\_\_\_\_. Answer: common sense

7)What is the scientific method?

Answer: the use of objective and systematic observation to test theories

8)Herbert Spencer suggested that to help lower classes is to interfere with the natural process of “ survival of the fittest.” This concept was the key element in his view of the evolution of society, called \_\_\_\_\_. Answer: social Darwinism

9)According to the Wall Street Journal, who were the three greatest modern thinkers? Answer: Karl Marx, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud

10)Why did Durkheim’s research support the position that suicide was more of a sociological issue rather than one based on psychological theory?

Answer: He found that people are more likely to commit suicide if their social connections are weak, and that suicide rates within countries and cultures remain constant, but differ considerably between cultures.

11)Karl Marx claimed that \_\_\_\_\_ was the central force of social change, while Max Weber argued that \_\_\_\_\_ was actually the central force of social change. Answer: economics; religion

12)What is the literal translation of the German word Verstehen as it was used by Weber? Answer:” to understand” or “ to grasp by sight”

13)Name the first three American universities to develop a sociology curriculum in the late 19th century. Answer: University of Kansas; University of Chicago; Atlanta University

14)What did C. Wright Mills mean by the term “ power elite”? Answer: the top business, political, and military leaders who made the major policy decisions and were a threat to the nation

15)Sociologically, what is the meaning of “ symbols”?

Answer: the things to which we attach meaning, the key to understanding how we view the world and communicate with one another

16)Robert Merton’s two classifications of function, both of which can help a system adjust, are called \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ functions. Answer: manifest; latent

17)According to Karl Marx, what single element was the key to understanding human history? Answer: class conflict

18)What are the similarities and differences between macro-level analysis and micro-level analysis? Answer: Macro-level analysis focuses on large-scale patterns of society. Micro-level analysis focuses on human behavior during social interactions.

19)What term does the American Sociological Society use to describe the encouragement it gives to politicians and policy makers to be more aware of the sociological perspective? Answer: public sociology

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20)What is globalization?

Answer: the erosion of national boundaries due to advances in communications, trade, and travel, placing sociology as the unrivaled discipline on the world scale

Essay Question

1. Define social location. Provide a detailed account of your own social location, how it has changed in the past year, and how you expect it to change in the next five years.
2. Trace the historical development of sociology in Europe, beginning with an explanation of positivism. Conclude the answer with a brief description of the contributions of Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber.
3. Briefly describe the four factors that contributed to the emergence of sociology as a discipline in the 19th century.
4. Describe various sociological perspectives of sociology and give examples from everyday life around us.