

SIXTH EDITION



THE PRACTICAL SKEPTIC

Core Concepts in Sociology

Lisa J. McIntyre

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Lisa J. McIntyre

Washington State University





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PREFACE

It wasn't until I was about halfway through my first decade of teaching that I finally had the opportunity to teach Introduction to Sociology. Did I *want* to teach Intro? You bet! I was ecstatic. I had been teaching various upper-division classes—research methods, social theory, criminology, law and society—but I wanted to be the one who introduced sociology to students. I wanted to share with students the enthusiasm that I felt for the entire sociological enterprise and to expose them to the power of sociological thought.

I tried to create an introductory course that would speak to the typical first-year student who isn't planning on majoring in sociology and, indeed, may not even know what sociology is. Even among sociology majors, very few plan on becoming sociologists. Each semester, I ask my beginning students, "Why are you here? What is it about sociology that interests you?" The very charitable say, "I don't know what sociology is, but I am sure that it will be interesting." Mostly, students are honest: "I'm here to fulfill my general education requirements." A few are more specific: "I have to take a social science class and my advisor said that sociology is easier than economics or political science."

I knew that once these students discovered sociology, they would find merit in it. Even if they didn't major in sociology, they would come away from the class with some important life knowledge. I quote Robert Bierstedt in my syllabus: "Sociology owns a proper place not only among the sciences, but also among the arts that liberate the human mind" (1960, 3). I paraphrase Peter Berger to suggest that students will find one of the most important lessons of sociology to be that "things are not what they

seem" (1963, 23)—that sociological training encourages people to look beyond the surface and to be suspicious of what "everybody knows." I tell them that it hardly matters what sort of career they are working toward: learning how to be skeptical and how to think like a sociologist will help them understand and resolve complex and abstract problems on the job.

So, I knew how I wanted to structure the course—we would learn the basic concepts and then talk and read about how these worked in the real world. But I couldn't find a textbook whose author had anticipated my wishes. I wanted a book that would introduce students to sociology's foundational concepts—the scientific method, culture, social structure, socialization, deviance, inequality. I wanted a book that would not bury those concepts inside tons of empirical information but would present them in such a way that students could gain enough understanding to apply them to what they read elsewhere and what they encountered in life. It was the sociological perspective I wanted these students to come away with, not the details.

I was encouraged to pursue this vision by something I read in an article by Frederick Campbell, a sociologist from the University of Washington. In the book he co-edited with Hubert Blalock and Reece McGee, Campbell wrote that undergraduate courses in sociology ought to focus on *principles rather than facts*: "The mastery of sociology has a different meaning in the context of undergraduate education than in vocational training or a graduate program. A baccalaureate degree in sociology seldom prepares a student for a specific occupation or to pursue independent research. Emphasis on the subject matter, then, has little value if it means memorizing material that will soon go out of date for a job that does not exist. Mastery should move away from factual material and focus instead on the development of the mind" (1985, 13).

The longer I taught introductory sociology, however, the greater became my frustration with the available instructional material. So, one summer, I sat down to write some introductory and background materials for my students. My idea was that I would introduce them to the concepts that sociologists use, and we would then apply these to what we read in a variety of sociological articles and to what we encountered in real life (and in the media). My goal was to provide my students with the tools they needed to understand the social world through the eyes of sociologists. As everyone who has taught introductory courses probably knows, the foundational concepts of our discipline are not simple ones, and many students resist them. My goal was not to simplify the concepts but to make them accessible to students.

The set of essays I wrote that summer—on the history of sociology and the vocabulary of science, culture, social structure, socialization, deviance, and inequality—seemed to serve my students well. After students read them, we moved on with our shared vocabulary to other works by sociologists and to discussions of how these concepts applied to the real world. It worked. It was as Peter Berger had promised in his *Invitation to Sociology*: “It is not the excitement of coming upon the totally unfamiliar, but rather the excitement of finding the familiar becoming transformed in its meaning. The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives” (1963, 21). Although I omitted much that is found in the typical sociology text (there are no chapters on family, religion, or politics), the concepts I did focus on (institutions, roles, values, and so on) allowed us to have relatively sophisticated discussions of those topics.

Be warned: I am not one of those sociologists who write in what Peter Berger called “a barbaric dialect.” I’ve taken C. Wright Mills’s caution to heart: “To get beyond sociological prose we must get beyond the sociologist’s pose” (1959). Notwithstanding the fact that I once had a book rejected by a noted university press because it was “too much of a good read,” I’ve persisted in my casual style and, whenever I couldn’t help it, have indulged my odd sense of humor. Many sociological concepts are very complex, and I think I have done justice to that complexity, but I have tried to do it in ways that are accessible to students.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

This edition uses updated statistics from the most recent census and other agencies. In response to suggestions from my readers, I continue to augment the discussions of topics that many students find difficult. In this edition, you will find new sections on the relationship between correlation and causation, ethnography, the mutability of deviance and the relationship between gender and income.

The goal of the book remains the same: to introduce students to sociology in a way that makes the core concepts of our discipline accessible without losing the crucial complexity of these concepts in translation. Along the way, I hope that I have managed as well to convey my enthusiasm for sociology.

SUPPLEMENTS

Visit our Online Learning Center Web site at <http://www.mhhe.com/mcintyre6e> for student and instructor resources. This is a

combined Web site for both *The Practical Skeptic: Core Concepts in Sociology*, and its companion reader, *The Practical Skeptic: Readings in Sociology*.

For Students

Student resources include comprehensive self-quizzes for both the text and reader.

For Instructors

The password-protected instructor portion of the Web site includes the instructor's manual (written by the author), containing discussion questions and activities, examples of lectures, tips specifically targeting new instructors, a comprehensive test bank, and all the tools available to students. Also included is a separate test bank for the reader with multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions for each reading.

THE COMPANION READER

Created to serve as a companion to the text, *The Practical Skeptic: Core Concepts in Sociology*, this reader, *The Practical Skeptic: Readings in Sociology*, includes classic sociological writings as well as recent writings on fascinating topics of interest to students. Corresponding to the conceptual organization of the text, each of the readings serves to illustrate key sociological concepts and ideas.

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Lisa J. McIntyre

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever caught yourself thinking about things that people do? Have you ever asked yourself, for example, questions about everyday things like these:

Why do some students always sit in the back of the classroom while others always sit in the front?

Why do African Americans on predominantly white college campuses frequently say “hi” to other African Americans, even if they don’t know them?

Why do we dress baby girls in pink and baby boys in blue?

Why do people generally not look at one another in elevators—and always face front?

Why do young men, but not young women, spit?

Why do we go to such lengths to pretend we aren’t embarrassed when we have to get naked in front of a doctor?

Why do people from small towns tend to act differently from people from big cities?

Why are most people less willing to seek professional help for mental or emotional problems than for physical problems?

Sociologists are trained to find answers to questions about people’s behavior. We are especially interested in understanding the effects that people have on one another.

Sociologists are convinced that much of people’s behavior is a result of what other people do. A sociologist reviewing the questions just listed would likely say that many of these behaviors result from how people are influenced by others.

This sociological conviction might offend you. Certainly, I like to think of myself as independent minded; you, too, may like to think that your behaviors are the results of choices you have made of your own free will. But allow me to persuade you that to understand people's behavior and the choices they make, it is important to take into account the influence of others in their environment.

Even when you think you are making your own choices, often you are picking only from the fairly limited range of options that others allow you. The simple fact is that, depending on your position in society—your age, gender, race, social class, and so on—people expect and allow you to act in various ways. Society places restrictions on your behavior with very little regard for your preferences.

Of course, you can choose not to live up to society's expectations, but if you decide to be contrary, you will pay a price. And, depending on the seriousness of your infraction, that price can range from endless nagging by your parents to a prison sentence and even to death!

Consider marriage. Surely, the decisions whether to get married, whom to marry, and when are very *personal* decisions. Actually, they are not. Examine this matter carefully and you will find that your marital choices are rather restricted. For example, in the United States, you can be married to only one person at a time. And (at least for the time being) you can marry only a person of the opposite sex—unless you live in one of the several states that allow same-sex marriage. Until the late 1960s, many states even had laws requiring people to marry within their own racial group—if you broke these laws, you could be sent to prison or exiled from the state.¹

Chances are, your family places even more restrictions on your marriage choices. Have you noticed that there are, in effect, family "rules" about whom you can marry? These rules may be unspoken but clear: Your parents may wish you to wed someone of your own race and religion and from the same educational and social-class background. Of course, there is no *law* that says family rules must be followed, but we all know that families have ways of making us suffer.

Even your friends may restrict your marriage (and dating) choices. Consider how they would make you suffer if you started to date some seriously weird geek.

You really have to wonder, why does everyone care so much about whom we marry? Now *that* is a sociological question!

So, What Is Sociology?

Here is a technical definition of sociology: *Sociology is the scientific study of interactions and relations among human beings.*

¹Some states have never rescinded these laws, but because such racial restrictions were ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967, even where they do exist, they do not have the force of law.

I hope the word *scientific* caught your attention. Including that word in the definition is a reminder that sociologists try to be very careful about how they find answers to their questions.

While the questions they ask are certainly influenced by their own interests and even their biases, they do not want their answers to be contaminated by bias or emotion or faulty logic—after all, they want their research to be persuasive to others. Therefore, as much as possible, they strive to be systematic in gathering data.

The Value of Sociology to Students

The goal of this book, and this course, is not so much to introduce you to new worlds as it is to inspire you to take a long hard look at familiar ones. And, I promise you, the reward for doing that will be much greater than the simple gratification of intellectual curiosity. There will be many practical rewards.

The practical value of taking a sociology course is that what you learn, by definition, *never will be irrelevant to your life*—present and future. Each of us lives in the social world; each of us is influenced by others and, to some extent, hopes to influence others. Studying sociology will strengthen your ability to understand how the social world operates and what your place is in it. Moreover, studying sociology will enhance your ability to act effectively in the social world.

Just to whet your appetite, let me share with you one of the most basic sociological truths as it was put into words in 1928 by the sociologist W. I. Thomas: “If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” The *Thomas theorem* articulated the sociological finding that had escaped many nonsociological observers. If one truly wants to understand why people do the things they do, one must take into account not only what is *really* going on in a particular situation but also what people *think* is going on. For example, if moviegoers believe the theater is on fire, they will react to the threat as if it were real, even if there is no fire. A consequence could be a panic in which people are trampled to death, even though the threat was never “real.”

Thomas’s insight helps us to understand how people live their everyday lives, too. Suppose the local newspaper runs a series of articles on how people are being victimized by crimes. The reporters pick the most interesting and most gruesome of criminal events on which to focus. Even if the reality is that these are uncommon events and that the actual rate of crime is going down, we would predict that people’s fear of crime would increase, which would have important consequences. For example, more people might purchase handguns for protection just at the point when things really are becoming safer. The increase in handgun

ownership might result in an increase in handgun deaths—kids playing with guns, panicked homeowners shooting neighbors stumbling around in the middle of the night, and so on.

Certainly, reality is important, because even when people do not define things as real, they can have real consequences. Thus, even if people do not know that the theater is on fire, they will die if they don't escape. But reality is only one factor that we must take into account to understand how people act and interact.

Sociology, then, is the discipline that studies the interactions and relationships among people—the realities and the perceived realities. Even given the seemingly countless variations in people's possible behaviors, sociologists are remarkably successful in shedding light on questions about why people do what they do and how they are influenced by one another.

My goal in this book has been to select the most important concepts that sociologists use and share them with you. My hope is that you, too, might apply these concepts as you work to move about in the social world more effectively and to understand it more thoroughly.

Tips for Studying Sociology— and an Invitation

To get the most out of your study of sociology, you will need to do more than simply read the book. Your goal should be to “own” the concepts—that is, not only to read, but to think about the concepts as well so that you can use them to understand social life. To help you achieve this goal, I have scattered Stop and Review questions throughout the book. I urge you to answer these questions. Many of my own students have told me that doing so makes it much easier to understand (and remember) sociological concepts. Several of my students tell me that they learn even more by making a list of the concepts for each chapter along with the definitions given in the book, and then writing their own definitions and examples.

Finally, I enjoy hearing from students (and their teachers, of course). If you have a question, comment, sociological example, or suggestion that you would like to share with me, please do so! I might use your example in the next edition of the book. (If I do that, I will be sure to give you credit—and I will make sure that you receive a copy of the book so that you can see your name in print.)

You can contact me via “snail mail” at Department of Sociology, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-4020, or e-mail at ljmcint@wsu.edu. Please include your mail or e-mail address so that I can respond.

RESPONDING TO CHAOS

A Brief History of Sociology

“He who watches a thing grow has the best view of it.”

—Heraclitus¹

I have always suspected that what people choose to study is a result of something other than mere accident. It seems to me that people study what they feel they most need to understand, and frequently, these are things that frighten them.

To the first peoples of the world, nature was overwhelmingly powerful and fear inspiring; the physical environment dominated the lives of men and women. The time of year dictated daily tasks—planting, reaping, hunting. The available vegetation and game dictated what people ate. Even after plants and animals were domesticated, menus were limited by climate—if you lived in the Northern Hemisphere, probably you would die without ever having tasted a mango or a banana.

It is easy to understand, then, why the earliest people focused their intellectual efforts on gaining an understanding of the physical world. Theirs were pressing questions: Why did the sun rise each morning and set each evening? Would it continue to do so? What made it rain? Why did the wind blow?

Obviously, humankind has never “conquered” nature, yet by the beginning of the nineteenth century, humanity had succeeded in making the natural world seem more predictable. But then, just as Westerners seemed to be getting a handle on the natural, their *social* world became frighteningly chaotic. People were accustomed to wars with foreigners, but in the eighteenth century nearly every European nation faced internal war in the form of revolution. By the time the nineteenth century rolled around, the political, economic, and religious foundations of society appeared

¹Heraclitus (hera-KLI-tus) was an ancient Greek philosopher (c. 540–480 B.C.E.).

to be on the verge of crumbling. Things were in chaos. People were frightened.

Inquiries into the Physical World

Although the most dramatic social upheavals occurred in the eighteenth century, rumblings had been heard as far back as the sixteenth century. It was during the sixteenth century that people started to question the validity of long-held beliefs about the fundamental nature of the world.

At first, these questions had to do with the physical world. In the second century of the common era,² Greek/Egyptian astronomer Claudius Ptolemy had determined that the earth was the center of the universe. (Actually this idea had been around at least since the fourth century B.C.E., but Ptolemy mathematically “proved” the theory using geometry.) More than a thousand years later, leaders of the Western Church still embraced Ptolemy’s view because it meshed with other ideas they held: Of course, the earth is at the center of things—“man” was God’s most important creation, and where else would God place man’s world but at the center of the universe? Anyway, if things were otherwise—if the earth were not the center of things but revolved around the sun—wouldn’t we feel the earth move?

In 1543, a Pole named Mikolaj Kopernik (better known now as Nicolaus Copernicus) in Frauenberg (a town in East Prussia)

²We are so accustomed to thinking that our ways of accounting for time are natural, that it comes as a shock to realize that these systems are very much human creations. For example, many people in Western societies distinguish between B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. for *Anno Domini* (or “in the year of our Lord,” and not “after death”). The B.C.–A.D. distinction did not appear spontaneously but was devised in 523 C.E. by the abbot of a Roman monastery, Dionysius Exiguus (also known as Peter the Little). Until then, the Church had followed the Roman tradition of dating events from the purported year of Rome’s creation (*Anno urbia conditae*, or year of the establishment of the city). Dionysius Exiguus calculated that Jesus was born in 753 A.U.C. and designated that year as 1 A.D.

The monk’s calculations have since been determined to be in error. Jesus of Nazareth was born during the reign of King Herod, and Herod died in 4 B.C. Thus, the birth of Jesus has traditionally been dated at least four years too late.

As an acknowledgment of the arbitrary beginnings of the Western calendar, many contemporary writers have substituted the terms B.C.E. (“before common era”) and C.E. (“common era”).

Of course, the Christian calendar has never been accepted everywhere in the world. The Islamic calendar, for example, dates the beginning of modern time from *Anno Hegirae* (A.H.), or the year of the Hegira—the year when Mohammed fled from Mecca to Medina (the Arabic word *hirira* means “flight”). The Prophet’s flight took place in what the Western calendar calculates to be 622 C.E. (and more specifically on July 16); that means that the year 2000 C.E. on the Western calendar was 421 A.H. Moving back and forth between the Western/Christian and Islamic calendars is further complicated by the fact that their years are not the same length: The Western calendar is calculated according to solar movement, the Islamic calendar according to lunar movement.

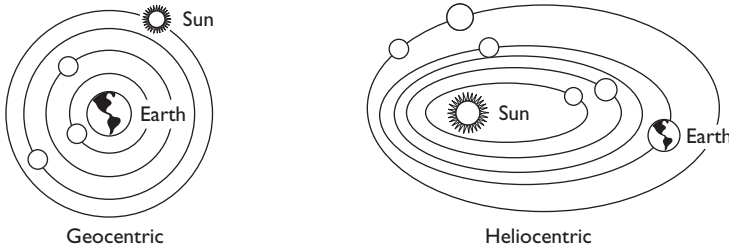


Figure 1.1
Competing Views
of the Cosmos.
Geocentric means
“earth-centered”;
heliocentric means
“sun-centered” (Helios
was the sun god of
Greek mythology).

published a book titled *On the Revolutions of Heavenly Bodies*. In this book Copernicus suggested that the *sun*, not the earth, was at the center of the universe and that the planets (including the earth) revolved around the sun. In other words, Copernicus properly described the cosmos as heliocentric, not geocentric (see figure 1.1).

The heliocentric perspective did not catch on right away. For one thing, Copernicus was such a timid fellow that he did not publish his theory until he was literally on his deathbed. And even after it was published, many people were reluctant to accept the Copernican view. Copernicus’s ideas of the universe contradicted those espoused by the Church. Contradicting the Church meant facing possibly serious consequences (even death). Why risk it? At best, Copernicus’s theory was a sophisticated guess. There was no way to test it.

Then, along came the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei, who was born in Pisa in 1564. In 1609, Galileo was visiting Venice, where he learned of a new device invented by spectacle-maker Hans Lippershey: a telescope. Back home, in 1610, Galileo built his own telescope (one that was three times as powerful as Lippershey’s original) and was the first to use the instrument to examine the heavens. Galileo found evidence to support the heliocentric theory. In 1632, Galileo presented this evidence in a book titled *Dialogo ai due Massimi Sistemi*, or *Dialogue on the Two Great Systems of the World*.

Galileo understood the risk of publicly contradicting the teachings of the Church. In hopes of reducing his risk, Galileo wrote his book as if it were a dialogue between two scholars—one who argued for Ptolemy’s (and the Church’s) view, the other who propounded Copernicus’s theory. At the end of the book, even though he had appeared to be winning the argument, the Copernican supporter suddenly gave up and admitted that the Ptolemaic view was the correct one. Because of this, asserted Galileo, his book *supported* the Church’s teaching.

But Galileo had not been clever enough. The final surrender of the Copernican scholar did not make up for the fact that throughout the book the Ptolemaic supporter had been portrayed as an

“The doctrine that the earth is neither the center of the universe, nor immovable, but moves, even with a daily rotation, is absurd, and both philosophically and theologically false, and at the least an error of faith.”

—Rome’s judgment against Galileo

unpersuasive simpleton. Anyone who actually read the book was left with the impression that religious leaders had been proved wrong about the nature of the universe. Because of this, the book was judged to be heresy, and Galileo was summoned to Rome to face the Inquisition. In other words, the Church leaders put Galileo on trial.³

In his defense, Galileo argued that there was nothing unholy or irreligious about his theory. After all, as Galileo reminded Church officials, *it was God* who had made the planets revolve around the sun. Galileo even asked the judges to look through his telescope to see the truth for themselves. Some of the judges did look but, stuffed full of Church doctrine, failed or refused to see.

In fact, Galileo's crime (if we must call it that) was to question the authority of the Church. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, a leading theologian of the Church, as much as told Galileo that it *didn't matter* what proof he had: "Physical reality is not to be explained by mathematics but by the Scriptures and Church fathers." Ultimately, faced with excommunication, Galileo was forced to recant—to take back his theory—and promise to be silent.⁴

Galileo died in 1642, having spent the final eight years of his life in enforced seclusion in Florence, Italy. Some twelve months later in England, Isaac Newton was born. Newton would salvage Galileo's reputation—and bring about the final undoing of the Church's authority over the workings of the natural world.

Newton was a brilliant mathematician—while still a student at Cambridge University, he discovered the binomial theorem—who became a professor at a very young age. His university career was put on hold in 1666, however, when the plague nearly turned London into a ghost town. Newton retreated to his family's farm in Lincolnshire. Farming was of little interest to Newton, so he built himself a laboratory wherein he might continue his research.

At least part of Newton's genius lay in his ability to look at data with a mind free of preconceived notions. He was not like the



Newton's most famous discovery, gravity, holds up planets. Newton also invented calculus, which often holds up students.

³The Inquisition was a tribunal or court of the Roman Catholic Church. It had been established in 1233 to deal with heresy, or crimes of unbelief. In 1542 (more than a century before it summoned Galileo), the Inquisition came to be called the Holy Office (though most still called it the Inquisition). In 1965 the Inquisition was replaced by the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith.

Don't confuse the Roman Inquisition with the much more notorious Spanish Inquisition. The latter had been established by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1478 to test the faith of converted Jews and, later, of converted Muslims. The Spanish Inquisition made frequent use of torture and capital punishment; the Roman Inquisition made only occasional use of such drastic measures.

⁴Galileo's reputation was eventually rehabilitated by the Catholic Church. In 1992, Pope John Paul II suggested that the condemnation of Galileo had been an error resulting from "tragic mutual incomprehension." The Church's acceptance of Galileo's contributions has not been total. In 2009, plans to place a statue of Galileo in the Vatican were quashed after church officials voiced concerns with the project.

Church officials, who looked but could not see. Newton studied the works of his predecessors, conducted his own experiments, and saw.

In a book titled *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), Newton posited his famous three laws of motion; from these Newton deduced the law of gravitation.⁵

First Law of Motion—The Law of Inertia

Nothing moves unless and until some force acts upon it.

Second Law of Motion—Law of Acceleration

Force is equal to mass times acceleration ($F = m \times a$).

Third Law of Motion—Law of Action and Reaction

To every action there is always an opposed and equal reaction.

Law of Gravitation

Every particle in the universe attracts every other particle with a force that is proportional to the product of the masses of the two particles, and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between their centers. This force is directed along a line between their centers.

Newton completely undid the traditional view of the cosmos by making it clear that the earth was not the center of the universe. But Newton did more: His simple laws explained the movement of everything visible in the universe. These laws explained not only how planets moved about in the cosmos, but also why buildings sometimes fell down and bridges sometimes collapsed. Because of Newton, astronomers could calculate the orbits of the planets, and engineers could build taller buildings and longer bridges.

*“Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in Night:
God said, ‘Let Newton be!’
And all was light.”*

—Alexander Pope

During the next century, religious leaders retreated from their position that their authority was the last word on the natural world. Newton’s findings were so compelling that the Church *had* to retreat. But, the Church leaders maintained, it was still God, not gravity, that ordered the individual’s place in the *social* world. As was frequently said, “The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them, high and lowly, and ordered their estate.”⁶ In short, each individual was born into a particular

⁵The story that Newton’s discovery of the law of gravity was inspired when an apple fell on his head was first recounted by the French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778), who claimed to have been told the tale by Newton’s niece.

⁶This verse is from the hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, by Irish poet Cecil Francis Alexander (1815–1895), published in 1848. Although this hymn is still sung in churches, this particular verse is omitted from modern hymnals.