

# Guide: Sociology in One Page

Biologically humans are different from other species in only 1 significant way -- our brains have massive cerebral cortexes which means we can THINK, abstractly and creatively (symbolically), WAY better than non-human animals. The ability to think **symbolically** means that human communication is largely based in complex systems of abstractions – spoken, written, and visual communication systems with varied and variable meaning. In contrast, non-human animals rely far more heavily on systems of SIGNALS and each signal has one clear meaning. The human brain's cerebral cortex made **instincts** obsolete and evolutionary liabilities; **human capacity for language and abstraction is capacity to CREATE meaning, to CONSTRUCT reality making humans unique among earth's species and ensuring our survival.**

The human capacity for THINKing is what allows us to communicate symbolically; and everything is symbolic to humans: our food, the ground under our feet, our g(G)ods, a glance, a smile, a keystroke, a sound. Symbols are heavy with meaning; it drips off them and blows around in the wind and looks and smells and tastes and feels and sounds different to each one of us. Symbols are how we communicate; we believe we understand each other because we share language. Language shapes and creates our social contexts and reflects our lived experiences; language allows us to understand one another, share our experiences and LEARN from one another. **Language is culture; it is social reality.**

**The central question: What does it mean? Is all about SYMBOLS and SHARED meaning within / across groups.**

In science, **assumptions** underpin and set the stage for research. Assumptions, in any field of research, are taken as givens; they are 'assumed' to be truth and therefore NOT questioned. Below are **assumptions sociologists make**:

**All distinctly human behavior is learned**

- human beings have no instincts; humans are animals, specifically mammals, and therefore have all the drives and reflexes that other mammals have. Instincts are complex behavior patterns exhibited by ALL members of a **species** – humans don't have any. Humans do have unique capacities, specifically complex symbolic language.

**Social forces influence human behavior**

- no (hu)man is an island
  - as a species we could not have survived or 'progressed' without high levels of cooperation
  - as individuals, it is cooperation with members of our social groups, that sustains us over our lifetimes

**Attitudes are misleading**

- what people say/think/believe and what those same people do are (often entirely) different things
  - sociology is (one of) the science(s) that focuses on explaining how attitudes and behavior are related

**Religion (like all social institutions including education, health, politics, the economy, and family) is a social construct**

- meaning – human beings create these things, or at least we create the ideas about them
  - because HUMANS are the ONLY species that communicates primarily SYMBOLICALLY
  - ALL symbols have multiple and varied meanings; **humans construct meaning through social interaction**
- sociology is (one of) the science(s) that focuses on symbols, their meaning AND varied interpretations

**Humans have limited free will**

- limits are imposed by social contexts in which we find ourselves, directly by laws, norms, or other social 'rules' (mores, taboos, fads, fashions) and indirectly through internalization of socially constructed ideas and values
- because humans LEARN everything, our ability to 'think outside the box' is ENTIRELY dependent upon the 'BOX' (social context) we are in; quite literally, we have to change the box to think outside it!

**Good and evil are relative**

- good and evil, as well as bad, positive, negative, etc., are judgment calls; their meanings are subjective and non-empirical. Words like 'good' and 'evil' refer to normative standards defined by social context.
- sociologists practice cultural relativism and consider ethnocentrism non-sociological; sociological inquiry is about peeling back the layers of meaning to find relevant empirical issues

**Truth is temporary**

- which makes the study of social life endlessly interesting; 'truth' is defined by social context and is therefore dependent upon historical and cultural factors. What is considered true is socially constructed.

**Sociology is the scientific study of humans and their social interaction so sociological inquiry happens within paradigms using causal logic, identifies sets of relevant social facts, and relies upon theory and systematic and organized empirically-based methods, to test the validity of the assumptions with details about specified social contexts.**