

Guide to Social Facts: What Counts as Sociological EVIDENCE

As a science, sociology relies on empirical evidence; Lisa Wade writes about this and you have other Learning Tools on this topic as well. **Social facts** are the data sociologists use in analysis, evaluation, and creating new sociological knowledge. Identifying **social facts** and using them to deeply describe social contexts and build answers to the three central questions is **doing sociology**. In one sense doing sociology is like doing math; you have to show your work so that others can see how you arrived at your answer. **Showing your work includes revealing the sources of your information which means in-text citing of sources, providing appropriate references, and providing relevant specifics and details.**

One difference between sociology and other social sciences is that sociology is explicit about levels or scope; throughout the semester I will use 'context' or level or scope AND the terms 'micro', 'meso', and 'macro' to identify them. Social facts differ across these levels or in these contexts. Distinguishing between the micro and macro levels, as well as between either of those and the meso level IS about social facts and about context – and we'll explore and (re)examine these all semester. Using social facts is identifying, and NAMING with appropriate sociological language, the specific evidence that is relevant to each of the three central; when we do that, we are DOING sociology. Required Materials and Glossary terms identify 'the sociology' current course content; appropriate social facts help you find answers to the **Three Central Questions (below)** which represent the three 'modes of inquiry' in sociology.

- **What does it mean?** To you, to your community, to members of a specific subculture, to other socially relevant groups?
 - **Relevant social facts are beliefs, values, ideals, symbols** – and how broadly they are shared is contextual.
- **Who is involved?** Is about who occupies particular social **ROLES**, social **POSITIONS**, and social **STATUSES**.
 - **Relevant social facts are the specific roles or statuses and the social characteristics of folks who occupy them.**
- **(How) Does it work?** Is about outcomes, results, consequences and whether or not they are **sustainable**.
 - **Relevant social facts include specifics of the above and social processes, social mechanisms and social relations(hips).**

Using appropriate sociological language is not just about using glossary terms; applying those terms accurately is about identifying examples that represent or illustrate the term. Include specifics and the details to illustrate and provide examples AND SHOW you have applied terms. PRACTICE this in note-taking, in your Annotations, and in discussion posts; try it out in class – and it will be a lot easier to do in Unit Tests and with the Final Team Project. When I read student work, I'm looking for specifics and details that tell me something about the following:

- **Who** is involved? Who are the social actors and what are their social roles; what are their ascribed and achieved statuses; what are the expectations and normative behaviors associated with their ROLES; HOW are these folks/social actors enacting their roles; how are they exercising their agency.
- **What** refers to social behavior OR cultural elements so what are the specific social practices, beliefs, values, norms, or social structures and what is their scope (individual, community, societal) OR at what level (micro, meso, or macro) do these exist or are they relevant.
- **Where** are the people or social phenomena located? Are they here at SU, in your hometown or other U.S. based communities? Are they in a particular region of the country/world or another country? Are they global?
- **When** is it; is it historical? Current? Did it happen yesterday? Over time? If it is a change, what are the relevant starting and ending points? **We can't collect data (or empirical information) on the future, so focus on current issues or past trends.**
- **Why** While the ultimate goal over the semester is to answer this question (in some limited ways), I'm looking for some information about WHY the issue interests you in your course work. Specifically, sharing what you have and have not figured out about the issue(s) really helps focus our shared class time.

Social context has both static (unchanging) parts and dynamic (changing) parts; USUALLY the norms, rules and other social structures, are the static piece and social relationships are the more dynamic piece. For example, in your relationship with your family, some of your statuses have not changed since you started college (e.g., son or daughter, sister or brother) but your age-status (from high school student to college student) has changed AND, your social roles have changed BECAUSE your status has changed. It is likely your parents' roles and your siblings' roles have changed to accommodate your change in status – which changes social relationships within your family. **Find and use social facts to construct a DEEP description by SHOWING how the Week's sociology applies to YOUR interests and chosen issue.** The 2nd page offers several ways to 'find' social facts – all language! **Human capacity to symbol is THE characteristic that separates humans from other species; it makes us uniquely adaptable as individuals and as a species. Symbolic interaction is also what makes human groups so diverse and changeable over time. The following is a BASIC introduction to sociological thinking about symboling, language, and uniquely human communication.** **Language:** A system of shared symbols; it includes speech, written characters, numerals, symbols, and nonverbal gestures and expressions; a socially structured system of sound patterns (words and sentences) with specific and arbitrary meanings. See also

argot, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis, **communication**, and **code-switching**.

- Shared language defines cultures, subcultures, and groups. Sharing language means that meaning is shared and therefore, that communication among members is effective; shared language means meaning is NOT arbitrary.
- Language represents social boundaries; language use and what it means to people in different social groups 'marks' the social boundaries between groups. Code switching is the ability to cross those boundaries through the understanding and use of language characteristic of each social group. LEARNING anything MEANS learning the meaning of the language.

Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis or the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is the idea that language shapes perception of reality and therefore thoughts and actions. "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (Sapir 1949, p. 162). Language, a symbolic system, is a tool humans use to socially construct realities; it reflects and reinforces social values and beliefs, and social arrangements and thereby socially constructs BOTH social interaction and the MEANING of social interaction.

- Sapir and Whorf were anthropologists. Their hypothesis about the role of languages as symbolic systems embedded in and definitional of culture is integral to sociology as well as to a liberal arts education, cultural relativism, tolerance, acceptance and, not surprisingly, to academic disciplines and the scientific method.
- Language and its role in shaping our understanding of the world is core to multi-disciplinarity and multiple literacies; ALL disciplines or MODES of thinking/understanding the world have their own language. Being able to recognize different modes of thinking/understanding, and apply them appropriately in different contexts is fundamental to problem solving.

Argot: Specialized language used by members of a group or subculture. **Glossary terms are the basic ARGOT of sociology!**

- The more specialized the language is, the 'smaller' the group that shares it is likely to be; if members of the group use the language to EXCLUDE others, language is used to set and maintain social boundaries – individuals can't become members of the subculture or group unless and until they demonstrate they understand and can use the argot. This ability is called code-switching.
- Learning the argot SO THAT one can code-switch effectively is often done unconsciously as a way to 'fit into' aspirational groups. Formal education consciously teaches disciplinary argots to develop disciplinary thinking/understanding.

Communication: Communication is the process by which humans create shared meaning and understanding. It is the process by which people transmit information, ideas, attitudes, and mental states to one another. Literal translation is 'to make common' (Online Etymology Dictionary); in other words, communication is about *sharing MEANING*. If understanding is not achieved . . .

- In ALL social contexts, communication is studied through the changes in behavior of social actors; successful/effective communication produces shared meaning or shared understanding. The extent to which individuals' 'understanding' is shared can be observed through their behavior, how they talk about it, what they do, and how they respond in relevant social contexts. Your course work is graded on criteria reflecting the extent to which you USE and UNDERSTAND the argot of the discipline of sociology; grades reflect the extent to which your course work reflects **sociological thinking**.
- Language, whether spoken, written, or images, is the vehicle for communication; language is also used, interpreted, misinterpreted, and misused, and socially constructed by users IN CONTEXT. We learn the meaning of language through using it just as you will LEARN sociology through DOING it. Sociologists attach specific meanings to language (glossary terms); it is more complicated to convey those meanings using non-sociological language. Course work introduces you to the language; you will LEARN what it means through DOING course work and talking about your work in and out of class.

Nonverbal Communication: The use of gestures, facial expressions, and other visual images to communicate; physical motions and gestures that provide social signals. Nonverbal communication includes the use of gestures and signs that are symbolic as well as body language, including tone of voice, posture, and a number of other signs that we as mammals are sensitive to and as human can learn to 'read'. Recognizing our own and others' non-verbal communication is part of self-reflexivity.

- Estimates are that in face-to-face contexts, as much as 95% of communication is non-verbal, most of which is related to what has been called 'EQ' the 'E' meaning emotion and corresponding to IQ. As social creatures, we unconsciously process a tremendous amount of information from social interactions. Sociology is about becoming CONSCIOUS of the process.
- Much of the information we receive through social interaction is body language and we are reacting to it rather than responding to it. It's the reason tone of voice is what matters to your dog (your words may be really nasty but if you sound happy, your dog is happy); it's also the reason we are emotionally connected to our animals and feel that we know how they feel (and that they know how we feel). Body language is the interspecies language; different 'bodies' have different languages but humans have a UNIQUE capacity to consciously respond – to THINK – rather than simply react.