The Sociological Paradox

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Sociology’s beginnings

- “Sociology” coined by Comte
- Scientific approach to studying human society
- Response to industrialization, urbanization & political revolution
- Major changes raised awareness of societal influence on individuals
- Comte: How can people be both cause and consequence of society?

Auguste Comte (1798-1857)
“I have chosen the image of architecture in the subtitle to convey one of the driving themes of this book: Society is a human construction. Society is not “out there” somewhere waiting to be visited and examined. It exists in the minute details of our day-to-day lives. Whenever we follow its rules or break them, enter its roles or shed them, work to change things or keep them as they are, we are adding another nail, plank, or frame to the structure of our society. In short, society—like the buildings around us—couldn’t exist were it not for the actions of people.

“At the same time, however, this structure that we have created appears to exist independently of us. We don’t usually spend much time thinking about the buildings we live, work, and play in as human constructions. We see them as finished products, not as the processes that created them. Only when something goes wrong—the pipes leak or the walls crack—do we realize that people made these structures and people are the ones who must fix them. When buildings outlive their usefulness or become dangerous to their inhabitants, people must renovate them or, if necessary, decide to tear them down.

“Likewise, society is so massive and has been around for so long that it appears to stand on its own, at a level above and beyond the toiling hands of individual people. But here, too, when things begin to go wrong—widespread discrimination, massive poverty, lack of affordable healthcare, escalating crimes rates—people must do something about it.

“So the fascinating paradox of human life is that we build society, collectively, “forget” that we’ve built it, and live under its massive and influential structure. But we are not “stuck” with society as it is. Human beings are the architects of their own society reality. Throughout this book, I examine the active roles individuals play in planning, maintaining, or fixing society.”
“Our personal, everyday experiences affect and are affected by the larger society in which we live…. You will read about what society consists of and get a glimpse into sociologists’ attempts to understand the two-way relationship between the individual and society.” (Newman, p. 1)
Individuals and society

- Society
  - Socialization
  - Social Control
  - Stratification
  - Ideology

- Individuals
  - Everyday Interactions
  - Social Movements
“In America it is assumed that men and women marry because they are in love. There is a broadly based popular mythology about the character of love as a violent, irresistible emotion that strikes where it will, a mystery that is the goal of most young people... As soon as one investigates, however, which people actually marry each other, one finds that the lightning-shaft of Cupid seems to be guided rather strongly within very definite channels of class, income, education, racial and religious background... [and] one finds channels of [courtship] interaction that are often rigid to the point of ritual. The suspicion begins to dawn on one that, most of the time, it is not so much the emotion of love that creates a certain kind of relationship, but that carefully predefined and often planned relationships eventually generate the desired emotions. In other words, when certain conditions are met or have been constructed, one allows oneself to ‘fall in love’” (Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, p. 35).
Individuals and society

- Socialization: process through which one learns how to act according to the rules and expectations of a particular culture.
- Social control: various means by which a society encourages conformity to its rules and expectations.
- Stratification: ranking system for groups of people that perpetuates unequal rewards and life chances in society.
- Ideology: coherent system of beliefs, values and ideas.
- Social movements: continuous, large-scale, organized collective action motivated by the desire to enact, stop, or reverse change in some area of society.

Definitions from Newman’s Sociology (2000)