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## The Sociological Advantage

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### Introduction:

Social thinkers like Plato, Rousseau, Augustine and Machiavelli understood that social behavior was not random and that the understanding of the basic principles and axioms of human behavior could provide an advantage in the management and control of social behavior. Furthermore, Comte, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and their disciples promoted the development of sociology as a useful and applied science. Human behavior manifests regular and recurrent patterns (Chinoy, 1954). As the scientific study of human social behavior, sociology provides insight and understanding and also attempts to explain the regularities of behavior at the individual, group and institutional levels. By understanding intersectionality and the patterns or forms of social interaction, the informed sociologist can effectively practice, teach and apply the sociological advantage, possibly even five moves ahead.

### The Theoretical Perspective:

As bio-socio-cultural products, humans live, for the most part, within normative frameworks that guide and govern social actions (Murdock, 1949). As Sumner (1906) noted, norms, mores and folkways shape, form and govern social behavior. Likewise, when individuals or groups share reciprocal expectations, social relationships become the basis for continued interaction. These patterned behaviors become intrinsic and established in a variety of statuses with their associated social roles.

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players;  
they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time  
plays many parts, his acts being seven ages (Shakespeare, 2015).

As a poet or playwright might observe, a sociologist systematically organizes these roles and statuses, seeking to identify, and possibly quantify, these forms of social action. Knowledge of culture, with its subsequent elements of roles and statuses, determines the context and parameters of social behavior. The more sociologists are able to define and understand these social facts, the more sociologists can understand, predict and possibly increase their control of the dynamics of social behavior at the individual, group and even societal levels.

This pursuit of the self and its relationship to others was a major component of sociological thought in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Simmel, with his emphasis on "sociability," focused on the structure of social situations and their impact on individuals and their interactions with others (Levine, 1971). His classic analysis of the "stranger," his study of group forms and his axiom that "Individuality in being and action generally increases to the degree that the social circles encompassing the individual expands" contributed to the growth and development of the "Chicago School" in early American sociology. Park, Thomas, Mead, Cooley and a generation of sociologists explored the role of context in shaping individual and basic group behavior (Coser, 1977). At the micro-level of social action, Cooley (1933), Mead (1934) and Thomas and Znaniecki (1916) focused on the context of socialization and its influence on the individual and his relationship with others. Leading to the development of the symbolic

interactionist perspective, these works contributed to the increased understanding of group dynamics and the development of social psychology.

In his "Outline of Collective Behavior," Herbert Blumer (1951) updated LeBon's (1895) study of the social and environmental conditions that contributed to different forms of crowd behavior. This analysis of social context and its contribution to the expressions of different forms of social action eventually contributed to the later development of more modern theories of collective behavior. For example, Turner and Killian (1957) developed an active view of social movements and identified external and internal factors that determine the character of collective behavior. Their focus on the role of emergent norms within the group context and Smelser's (1962) value-added model, which focused on "structurally conducive environments," provided insight and understanding of contexts and situations favorable to certain forms of group or collective motivation or even mobilization.

George Homans (1950) synthesized much of the work on group behavior and developed a number of axioms regarding context and patterns. Identifying the structure, hierarchies of influence, control and regularities of interpersonal relations, he provided guidelines for leadership and management and the development of mid-range theoretical propositions. In reviewing numerous classical sociological case studies, he stated for that "the closer an individual or a subgroup comes to realizing in all activities the norms of the group as a whole, the higher will be the social rank of the individual or subgroup" (180-181). In addition, he developed a number of other axioms dealing with social rank, span of control, and contributing factors to leadership and authority within a group.

It is hard to believe that social scientists could have worked out many generalizations about the behavior of men in groups, if there had been no persistencies in this behavior, and we have been no different from other social scientists in this respect (Homans, 1950: 311).

The development of axioms of interaction and the knowledge of the structural conditions and contexts of social action provided the basic elements of the sociological advantage.

This advantage, however, raised concerns about the potential fascist tendencies of social engineering. The rise of critical theory and the Frankfurt School of social thought in the late 1930s cast doubts about the ethical application of social knowledge. With a growing concern about the increased alienation within society and the rise of authoritarianism, social scientists like Horkheimer (1972), Adorno (1950) and Fromm (1941) focused on the increased role of bureaucratic rationalization and the social conditions which contributed to the willingness of the masses to exchange personal liberty for security. The manipulation of the masses through the media was a significant concern of the Frankfurt School (Calhoun, et.al., 2012). The Frankfurt School emerged in reaction to the rise of fascism and its use of group and crowd manipulation

exemplified by Reifentahl's (1935) classic propaganda film, "Triumph of the Will," of the 1934 NAZI Rally in Nuremberg.

The potential and problems of understanding and even controlling group dynamics became a popular topic in the post-World War II period. The lingering fear of fascism and the growing threat of Stalinist Soviet Union set the scene for Orwell's (1949) *1984*. In a more positive though still somewhat disturbing effort, B.F. Skinner's (1948) utopian novel *Walden Two* showed the potential application of behavioral management techniques. Nevertheless, by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociology was making relevant contributions to understanding society and its constituent parts. Stouffer's (1949) *American Soldier* was matched by NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall's ardent pleas in front of the United States Supreme Court, invoking sociological, psychological and anthropological findings which ultimately led to the demise of school segregation (Roberts, 1970). *The Organization Man* by William H. Whyte (1956) was hailed as one of the most influential books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in its analysis and depiction of the postwar corporate and social world (Bates, 2015). These efforts stressed the utility and practical application of sociology's understanding of group dynamics.

By the 1960s and 1970s, however, much of the focus of sociological inquiry shifted from the structural-functional perspective and interest in group and organizational dynamics to one of conflict, crisis and social change. However, after the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, the discipline increasingly sought to understand the individual and group experience from a more introspective rather than structural or patterned perspective. Again turning to symbolic interactionism, this trend in social thought went from the traditional perspective of objectively studying issues from a structural perspective to one of subjectively interpreting issues from the inside looking out. In many ways, sociology morphed into sub-cultural anthropology. The differences between the normative and non-normative were replaced by sub-cultural relativity. The "Sociology of..." was being challenged by subjective validity and deconstructionism (Bates, 2015). Though interesting and insightful, this modern trend of sociological inquiry has not contributed to the development of useful theoretical propositions and the sociological advantage.

C. Wright Mills (1959) suggested that the sociological imagination allows us to consider how the forces of history and society affect individuals and their social situations. Simmel's approach to sociology identified the forms and patterns of individual, group and organizational action and the patterns or models of their relationships (Levine, 1971). Patricia Hill Collins (1992) noted that the intersection of race, class and gender was a source of power and possibly oppression in society. In a more lyrical and less scientific genre, Simon and Garfunkel (1965) discussed the power of social structure and intersectionality in their song *Patterns*.

From the moment of my birth to the instant of my death,  
there are patterns I must follow just as I must breathe each breath.  
Like a rat in a maze the path before me lies and the pattern never  
alters until the rat dies.

And the pattern still remains on the wall where darkness fell,  
and it's fitting that it should for in darkness I must dwell.  
Like the color of my skin or the day that I grow old,  
my life is made of patterns that can scarcely be controlled (Simon, 1965).

Our lives are full of patterns (be they of class, race, gender or interaction) that shape the probabilities and possibilities of social action.

The sociological advantage, therefore, employs the basic understandings of culture, structure, power and interaction within the socio-historical context of individual, group and institutional action. Using a sports metaphor, the sociological advantage provides a scouting report and game plan for the application of strategies of applied sociological knowledge. This perspective looks at issues and situations and their impact as well as factors related to potential social outcomes. Moving away from the micro, this perspective would again make sociology relevant for organizations and institutions. Unlike the public sociology of Burawoy (2005), this applied sociology would bring the discipline back to its roots and the promise that it once offered.

This renewed focus on forms would permit a reconsideration of sociology in the tradition of Comte's original concept of social physics. Social forms and their patterns of relationship are never as consistent as mathematical or scientific laws, but they lead to probability statements that contribute to useful conclusions. In fact, this new sociology would facilitate scouting reports to promote individual, group and organizational improvements and successes (Bates, 2015).

Building on the foundation developed by those who have come before us, sociology can again be a practical tool of social understanding and application. The sociological advantage takes our knowledge of the social context, environment and particularly the intersectionality of race, class and gender and employs the established principles and axioms of group dynamics. The application and understanding of the sociological advantage may allow us not only to address issues at the individual, group and institutional levels, but also to be "five moves ahead."

#### A Pedagogical Perspective:

Sociological analysis still maintains a place at the front and center of societal issues, helping to analyze and discuss, identify and interpret, and solve problems in global, national or local arenas. Now more than ever, sociology can take on challenges, whether it is used to help interpret the cultural habits and practices of those in another country or whether it is used to solve the issues that continue to plague communities riddled with poverty and substance abuse. Sociological analysis has withstood the test of time; its practice is still relevant today as it continues to transcend boundaries and borders, particularly within the intersectionality of race, class and gender at the micro and macro-levels (Collins, 1992).

Society and our lives within society are ever evolving, ever growing and ever changing. Often these iterations of change, growth, adaptation or evolution affect us in ways that

produce both manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions. These can be positive or negative, and in many instances they produce consequences that are either unintended or that we are not prepared for. Because sociology is both a behavioral and phenomenological science, what better way to help us look introspectively at the changes that will confront us throughout life than from the perspective of the sociological advantage? The tools that sociology provides can help us navigate these changes.

Our understanding of social relations, social behavior and social change is the cornerstone making sociology relevant. Not only has the discipline made tremendous strides through teaching and research to analyze, discuss and interpret social institutions and our social selves, but also it continues to transcend boundaries by reaching into the fields of politics, business, sports, the work environment and community activism. Although some might believe sociology is on the decline, its applications have never been more in demand. To solidify sociology's role and to give students the advantage of thinking five moves ahead, sociology degree programs can train, teach, guide and mentor students from the perspective of the sociological advantage.

Teaching the sociological advantage equips future sociologists to confront social, intellectual, political and moral challenges. Offering instruction through a combination of critical pedagogy and active mentorship stretches students to their potential for careers of servant leadership and community engagement. Model United Nations and study abroad programs increase their global awareness of the impact of race, class and gender and create a changed perception of the world, their communities and themselves.

### Liberation Sociology

Teaching from the perspective of the sociological advantage includes instructing students in the use of a critical thinking and analysis. Through active engagement, students learn from the works of sociologists like Patricia Hill Collins and other social theorists. Two seminal works are Joe R. Feagin and Hernan Vera's *Liberation Sociology* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. *Liberation Sociology* says, "the point of liberation sociology is not just to research the social world but to change it in the direction of democracy and social justice; that its purpose is oriented toward people acting to change oppressive conditions that restrict human lives" (Feagin & Vera, 2001, p.1, 35). Exposing students to works such as this prepares them to be "concerned with alleviating or eliminating various social oppressions and with creating societies that are more just and egalitarian societies" (Feagin & Vera, 2001, p.1). Students learn a "countersystem approach" through which they step outside their own society in order to better view it, heighten their empathetic compassion for human suffering and reenact their commitment to reducing that suffering" (Feagin & Vera, 2001, p.1). Feagin and Vera go on further to write, "a critical and committed sociology can help those who are powerless to become more powerful and to give voice to those who are oppressed and voiceless. To bring change, powerless human beings must be empowered. The

sociology of liberation is not just a sociology that discusses liberation; it is a sociology that can show or facilitate the way to it" (Feagin & Vera, 2001, p. 21, 34-35).

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* exposes students to critical pedagogy and liberation sociology. He considers students to be "co-creators of their own knowledge" (1970, p.2). They learn the concept of "conscientization," a process that Freire believes "uses education as a means of consciously shaping their person and the society" (1970, p. 3). Both tenets increase critical consciousness as emerging change agents. For the student learning from the sociological advantage, this results in participatory action strategies.

In the community, students practice a bottom-up approach where they first listen. Together both groups come up with ways they can jointly approach and solve problems. They have helped residents make their neighborhoods more drug-free, provided tutoring to children and non-traditional adult learners, encouraged increased education and job training, and organized health and wellness fairs. The sociological advantage facilitates stronger collaboration between students and the community.

### Mentorship

As a society we are currently faced with serious issues that involve both personal and social conditions. In addition, as a society we also grapple with serious concerns related to global peace and security, human rights, and economic and social development. The issues between and among our countries are in need of extensive discussion. Although well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the notions of world peace, mutual tolerance, understanding and respect still escape us. As such, it becomes more important to engage students in the investigation of better and more effective ways to engage in multi-lateral diplomacy. Within the framework of the intersectionality of race, class and gender, students seek solutions leading to world peace. Through participation in the Model United Nations, students apply the sociological advantage and receive training in multi-lateral diplomacy and conflict resolution. This active training and mentorship, including independent study and participation in Model United Nations programs, prepares students to address these issues. The faculty mentor conducts class at least once per week and meets individually with all students to help frame research questions, strengthen critical analysis applications, and conduct mock presentations of original research. Students work with members of their own team and with Model UN student delegations from nearby universities. Through the application of the sociological advantage, the students are prepared for the annual Model UN conference in New York.

Study abroad also has been another mentoring approach to apply the sociological advantage. Studying abroad enhances students' ability to learn concepts such as race, class, gender, tolerance and compassion in a way that cannot be facilitated nearly as well in the traditional campus classroom. When they are away from their home

campuses and their home countries, their experiences enhance their critical awareness, consciousness, and analytical skills.

Many theorists have written about the advantages of study abroad programs. Elizabeth Lindsey (2005) believed these experiences enhance the consciousness of those exposed in the following ways: by “opening the mind to new ways of thinking; by shedding awareness and insight into one’s own values and beliefs; by enhancing social awareness and challenges to their own societal values and beliefs; and by enhancing their awareness in appreciating difference, cultural sensitivity, anti-discriminatory practices, social justice, and professional identity development.” (p.236.). Salisbury (2009) noted, “students who study abroad develop a deeper understanding and respect for global issues, more favorable attitudes toward other cultures, and stronger intercultural communication skills” (p.120). Persell (2008) indicated that when students become active learners in study abroad programs, they gain experiences that “increase their exposure to multicultural, cross-cultural, and cross-national content relevant to sociology and which helps students’ critical thinking skills to further prepare them for lives of civic engagement” (p.109).

The tools taught by the sociological advantage help students navigate the changes certain to confront them as they develop as evolving beings. As long as the world continues to have the kind of problems that require solutions, there will continue to be a need for the teaching of the sociological advantage. It stretches students beyond their potential, prepares them for a life and career of servant leadership, and provides them with the tools that can put them five moves ahead.

#### A Student’s Perspective:

Learning the sociological advantage has illuminated my “self-awareness” (Myers, 2013, p.36.)and my reflections on five decades of life experiences. Since beginning my studies, I have transformed from an agent who has learned to one who now *lives* the sociological advantage. I have become increasingly aware of my transformation into an advocate for and agent of social change. Charles Lemert’s (1999) book, *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, enlarged my understanding of class, structure and stratification. Karl Marx’s conflict perspective impressed on me the notion that conflict is due to resources being scarce and, in turn, creating the struggle between the “haves and the have-nots.” I saw Ritzer’s “*McDonaldization*” as a source of conflict for the working class, and I began to see the disproportionate benefits that the privileged few gained at the expense of the working class (Ferrante, 2011, p.141). Durkheim’s structural-functionalist perspective taught that the absence of moral regulation and forced division of labor can lead to anomic outcomes. Furthermore, Weber wrote that social class was economically determined; that status was based on qualities such as honor, prestige, and religion; and that “party” was a concept that referred to political affiliations. Robert Merton’s *Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage* (1968) and his *Structural Strain Theory* (1965) argues that the lack of opportunity and inadequate access to institutional means can lead to illegitimate and deviant attempts to obtain that which society has established as perceived cultural and societal norms – or “that which

is worthwhile” (Lemert, 1999 p.174). W.E.B. Dubois (1998) and his study of the connection between societal influence and social psychology argued that the “*wages of whiteness*” and “*psychological wage*” was an ideology of white supremacy that stopped black and white workers from uniting as a social class, keeping the wages of both classes low, the whites fearing to be replaced by [black] labor, and the [blacks] always being threatened by the substitution of white labor” (Dubois, 1998, p. 700). Especially contributing to my perspective of the sociological advantage and intersectionality was the work of Peggy McIntosh (1988) in her article, “*White Privilege and Male Privilege.*” She argues that male privilege and white privilege are interrelated and asserts that “just as men do not acknowledge all the ways they are privileged in society, whites do not recognize how their status as white people confers upon them many privileges” (McIntosh, 1988, p.3). Other works which influenced me as a social change agent were Dan Millman’s (2006) *Way of The Peaceful Warrior*, Joe R. Feagin and Hernan Vera’s (2001) *Liberation Sociology*, and Patricia Hill Collins and Margaret Anderson’s (1992) *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*. My course of study from the sociological advantage moved me from “learning the sociological advantage” to “living the sociological advantage”.

My understanding of the sociological advantage and transformation into a social change agent was augmented by participating in Model UN conferences at the United Nations (UN) in New York City, studying abroad in Ecuador, Galapagos Islands, and by attending a Model UN conference in Prague, Czech Republic. Living the sociological advantage has increased my awareness that I am surrounded by unlimited possibilities to help others and to advocate for social change. I am living the sociological advantage determined to transform society for the better. I founded the Real Help! Network to educate for addiction recovery and prevention and was co-founder of the South Georgia Nonprofit Collaboration Network. I helped create Students for Structural Change (SSC) at Clayton State University.

Living and learning the sociological advantage has taught me that nothing changes in the social construct of reality until a social change agent helps to facilitate the change. I now feel equipped to operate from a position that puts me possibly five moves ahead and as one who can make a difference in creating a more just, equitable and improved society.

### **Summary**

The sociological advantage, be it a theoretical perspective, pedagogical tool or a life-shaping and changing experience, is based upon the best of the sociological tradition. With a solid foundation of structure, an understanding of the patterns of social behavior and of the impact of the intersectionality of race, class and gender, the sociological advantage allows the discipline and its adherents to be five moves ahead in understanding and making a difference in society.

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