Although the introductory sociology course typically conveys some information about society (primarily American society), I think most sociology instructors would agree that it is more important for students to grasp some fundamental sociological concepts: role, interaction, structure, conflict, socialization, and so on. I am not so naive, however, as to imagine that we would ever agree on precisely what the most important concepts are.

In my own teaching and writing, I have found it even more important to ground students in some basic principles or metaconcepts that distinguish the sociological view of things and that make sense of the concepts we weave together in the sociological construction of society. Below I will identify and describe briefly ten basic principles, not in the hope of reaching agreement with my colleagues, but with the idea that our disagreement might be productive.

1. Society has a sui generis existence and reality.

We are indebted to Emile Durkheim for the assertion that society cannot be reduced to its presumably component parts. You can’t understand society fully by understanding only the individual human beings who constitute it. Here are some illustrative examples:

   Few people want war, but wars occur all the time.
   A substantial majority of the American public wants gun control, but we don’t have it.
   This point has numerous implications. For example, it can redirect efforts to identify and deal with social problems, allowing for the possibility that some problems stem from the way in which society is structured and functions rather than from evildoers. The fact that women continue to earn only about 60 percent as much as men in the United States, the fact that black American babies have twice the infant mortality rate of white American babies, and similar social facts cannot be explained in terms of individual human beings doing bad things.

   Recently this matter was illustrated dramatically when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to declare capital punishment racially discriminatory on the basis of incontrovertible statistical evidence. Instead, they said, it would be necessary to show that individual jurors had made their decisions on the basis of racial prejudice. In other words, the Court was unwilling to consider the possibility that a system could be racist, whether or not the individual participants were racist.

2. It is possible to study society scientifically.

In the fine tradition of Auguste Comte, we must point out to students that knowledge about society can be more than learned beliefs or “common sense.” It is possible to study society scientifically, just as we study aspects of the physical world.

   I find the potency of probability sampling an effective vehicle for making this point. Students are impressed to learn that a sample of 1500 voters can predict so accurately the eventual votes of tens of millions. I remind them that social scientists sometimes are accused of taking all the suspense out of elections—because we are so accurate.

   Some students are convinced by the classic examples of Stouffer’s (1949, 1950) work on relative deprivation. After presenting the seemingly trivial “findings” that 1. black soldiers had higher morale in northern than in southern training camps, 2. soldiers in the Army Air Corps were the most likely to think the promotion system was fair, and 3. the most highly educated soldiers were the most likely to resent being drafted, I reveal that Stouffer discovered just the opposite of each of these “findings.” Then we set about understanding how the con-
cept of relative deprivation makes sense of such puzzling discoveries, as follows:

1. Black soldiers in southern training camps considered themselves better off than the black civilians around them; black soldiers in the north, however, were not doing as well as black civilians in the north.

2. Soldiers in the Army Air Corps, where promotions generally were rapid, were likely to know of someone who had been unfairly promoted faster than themselves; in contrast, there was little opportunity for apparent unfairness in the Military Police, where promotions were slow for everyone.

3. Less highly educated soldiers were more likely to have friends working on assembly lines or as farm laborers—occupations that were exempted from the draft—whereas more highly educated soldiers were unlikely to have friends who were exempted. Thus the less highly educated soldiers were more likely to feel that they had been treated unfairly in comparison with their friends, whereas the better-educated soldiers felt that they had been treated the same as everyone else.

Sociology is the perfect vehicle for training students in critical thinking, and we provide that training in demonstrating the use of logic and empirical observation as tools of rigorous discovery.


I know that the term, autopoiesis, which I take from the Chilean biologist/philosopher, Humberto Maturana (1980), is not well known to sociologists. Moreover, Maturana has said that the term does not apply to society—but then, he's not a sociologist.

Autopoiesis might be defined as "self-creation." It is easiest to understand the term through linguistic examples. Some statements, for example, become true in their assertion. That is, saying them makes them true, as in these illustrations:

I apologize.
I am speaking.

I think that sociology can offer the powerful statement that society is autopoetic: society creates itself. If society can be seen as a network of norms, sanctions, values, and beliefs, for example, where did all those elements come from? Most of us have long since given up the notion that they came from gods or from natural law. The norms that govern the operation of society are generated in the operation of society.

The importance of this view for students is that it undercuts notions about what is "really" so. Monogamy, democracy, honesty, politeness, and consideration for others may be norms of modern American society, but they also were produced by American society. This concept, if grasped, provides a fertile ground for the establishment of cultural relativity in place of ethnocentrism.

4. Cultures differ widely across time and space.

Here we join our anthropological colleagues in pointing out that all of creation is not white, American, and middle class. We understand this point, but it is a shocking eye-opener to many freshmen. Gaining awareness that differences exist, however, is only the beginning. Our second task in this regard is to undermine students' implicit ethnocentrism, offering the possibility of tolerance and even of cultural relativism as an alternative approach to the world. Insofar as students can begin to see cultural forms as merely different rather than better or worse, we have offered them a point of view that will serve them and those with whom they share the planet.

I do not mean by these comments to urge a dogmatic egalitarianism as regards cultural differences. I would hope that students emerge from their studies favoring democracy over totalitarianism, racial tolerance over prejudice, and any number of other value-based positions. Our aim, however, should be that such choices are made on the basis of analysis and reflection rather than simply by default through cultural inheritance, perpetuated by ignorance.

5. The individual and the society are inseparable.

Earlier I noted that society cannot be reduced to the level of individuals: society has a sui generis

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2 This is not to say that they are unique to us. They also were self-created by other societies.
existence at a different level. Now, I wish to verge on suggesting that individuals are merely figments of society. Without going quite that far, however, I want to point to another contribution that sociology can make to students.

Individual identity is strongly sociogenetic. Often I engage students in a conversation about “who they are.” Typically I begin with the Kuhn-McPartland (1954) Twenty Statement Test, in which I ask them to write out 20 answers to the question, “Who am I?” We spend some time finding patterns in their responses; eventually we reach the realization that virtually all the answers they offer—student, daughter, baseball player, liberal, and so on—are social statuses.

Although we also spend time on the question of who they really are and discover that we can’t express the answer satisfactorily in words—they grasp the point that they express their identities totally in terms of their standing in society. If there were no society, none of their “identities” would apply.

The advantage of this realization, I think, is that students eventually can come to see how they occupy social statuses, and that they could choose to occupy different statuses if they wished to do so. Moreover, this distancing from their statuses makes them less vulnerable to attack by others. When someone complains that students are noisy and irresponsible, my students are less likely to take that complaint as a personal attack and can ask instead whether it’s true of them.

6. Systems have system needs.

Along with the discovery that society is an entity students also can gain from sociology the important insight that society—as a system—has “needs.” This message carries the risk that students may tend to anthropomorphize society, assuming that it has desires, motives, and similar human qualities. As a remedy, it’s useful at times to point out that an automobile also has needs, though these needs—gasoline, oil, electricity, cooling—are very different from those of a human being. I find that this analogy helps students see that a system can have needs which reflect its particular structure and operation.

Rather than attempting to walk students through Parsons’s “AGIL” or any similar system, I usually discuss replacement as a fundamental need for a society. People die, so some provision must be made for the production of replacements. Initially this point involves a discussion of the various forms of the family, but it goes beyond that topic to socialization, because an infant is hardly a replacement for a rocket scientist (or even for a sociology professor, for that matter).

Usually, I spice things up with a brilliant but largely unknown book by John Gall (1975), entitled Systemantics: How Systems Work and Especially How They Fail. Gall discusses how systems tend to take over, once they’ve been created. One of his key points is that the survival interests of the system often gain precedence over and work against the purposes that led to the creation of the system in the first place.

An appreciation of system imperatives is important to students, I think, when they set out to change social conditions that they find unacceptable. If the processes creating those conditions are linked to system survival needs, students should be aware of that link, or else their efforts for change will be ineffective.

7. Institutions are inherently conservative.

To follow from Point 6, it is important for students to realize that the first function of any institution is survival. If there were ever institutions whose purpose was self-eradication, they no longer exist to educate us about the genre. Rather, institutions are structured so as to ensure their own survival. They are fundamentally conservative in the sense of “conservation,” not in the conservative-versus-liberal sense.

Moreover, in an integrated society, institutions support each other’s survival. The government pays for schools that tell students to be law-abiding; parents take their children to church, where they are told to revere and obey their parents. Yet the inherent conservatism of institutions as institutions does not prevent them from serving also as sources of change within the society as a whole. This situation is likely, for example, when the interests of different institutions conflict—such as those of religion and education.

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3 I suspect that this book has not been taken seriously by sociologists because—like Parkinson’s Law and The Peter Principle, two books that it emulates—it is too much fun. Somehow we assume that important analyses must be boring.
The idea of institutional conservatism usually provides a fruitful context in which to introduce other basic notions: socialization, internalization, and the ways in which individual identity is woven into institutional structures.

8. Explanatory sociology is implicitly deterministic.

This topic is often troublesome for students. I suggest that explanatory social science is grounded implicitly in a deterministic image of human beings. When we set out to discover the causes of prejudice, for example, we assume that prejudice is caused by something and that free choice is not one of the possibilities. In somewhat different terms, we operate with a model which assumes that human behavior is determined by forces, factors, and circumstances which the individual actors are unaware of and/or cannot control. Put more crudely, this model suggests that human beings—including you and me—do not have the free will we imagine we have.

I've discussed this issue at length elsewhere (Babbie 1986, 1989), so I'll avoid a recapitulation here. Sociologists do not believe that humans lack free will, but the model we use for explanation assumes that to be the case. I point out to students that whether we have freedom in any ultimate sense, all of us tend to live our lives in largely deterministic ways. It is useful to point out the extent to which we give away our freedom in our language, as when we say: “You make me so angry,” “The IRS won’t let us do that,” or “I could never talk to him after he said that.”

9. Paradigms shape what we see and how we understand.

It is important to communicate the idea of paradigms to all students, and sociology is the perfect vehicle for doing so. Students need to learn that paradigms are ways of looking at life, but are not life itself. They focus attention so as to reveal things, but inevitably they conceal other things, perhaps rather like microscopes or telescopes. Paradigms allow us to see things that otherwise would be hidden from us, but they do so at a cost.

Paradigms also color our vision, as in the analogy of colored glasses. If you wear red-tinted glasses, everything looks reddish; blue glasses give the world a blush; and so forth. Students can see that point, and the linchpin of the analogy is the assumption that you have to wear some set of glasses in order to see. This point helps students to appreciate the dilemma of whether we can ever know what’s “real” or “true.”

Of course, it is important to familiarize students with the three basic sociological paradigms: structural functionalism (or social systems theory), interactionism, and conflict theory. If they seem able to grasp these broad distinctions, you can add such paradigms as role theory, exchange theory, and labeling theory. The key point is that each of the sociological paradigms offers powerful insights into the nature of social life, but that none of them represents the whole truth.

You can make an even more powerful contribution by helping students to see rationality as a paradigm. At the outset, students will regard rationality essentially as “the way things are” or at least as “the way they should be.” Whenever I ask students to think of alternatives to rationality, they seldom go beyond “irrationality.” Usually they get a little nervous when I seem to suggest that rationality isn’t the “true” or even the “best” paradigm.

Rationality may have given us Teflon, but it isn’t much good for the appreciation of poetry. Further, it has little to contribute to the experience of love or of making love. In a moment of passion, for example, when your partner shouts, “God! I love it!” don’t ask how much or point out that you are not actually a god.

Rational sociological paradigms aren’t much use at such a moment, either. Don’t go functionalist and ask, “Do you want to know how this works?” Don’t put on your interactionist cap and ask, “What exactly does this symbolize?” And no matter how strongly you may be committed to a conflict perspective, never say, “Did you know that this is what capitalism does to the working class?”

10. Sociology is an idea whose time has come.

I’d like to conclude these comments on a possibly chauvinistic note: all of the major problems that face us as a society and as a world are located within the territory studied by sociol-
ogy. I say this in deliberate contrast to the widely held view that most of our problems will be solved by technology. I have discussed this point elsewhere (Babbie 1988), so I will give only a few illustrations here:

- Overpopulation is an enormous problem for our planet. Although the invention of a variety of effective contraceptive methods is to be welcomed, these methods have not solved the problem. The solution lies in the realm of values and norms.
- Agricultural advances have not ended the tragedy of world hunger, which kills 13 to 18 million people every year. In fact, we now produce more than enough food to feed everyone on the planet, and local famines account for only about 10 percent of the annual deaths due to hunger. The remaining 90 percent are a consequence of chronic, persistent hunger, the solution to which lies in socioeconomic structures and in the social psychology that keeps us from doing what is necessary.
- Finally, we have spent much of our history in the search for weapons that will make war unacceptable or unthinkable, but we have merely expanded our ability to kill on a grand scale. The solution to war, again, lies in the domain addressed by sociology.

I do not mean to suggest that sociology currently has all the answers to all the problems of the world. I do suggest, however, that sociology is the place to look for answers to a great many of those problems. In this sense I suggest that sociology is an idea whose time has come.

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Earl Babbie is Vice President for Research and Planning at Chapman College. Prior to his current position, he served as Chair of the Social Science Division and still teaches research methods. He is the author of several textbooks; best-known of these is The Practice of Social Research. He is a member of the ASA Teaching Committee and the Membership Committee. Address correspondence to Earl Babbie, Chapman College, Orange, CA 92666. Compuserve:76424,156.
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