

## Reading 3

# Careers in Sociology

*W. Richard Stephens, Jr.*

### Step #1: "Why am I in Sociology Anyway?"

If you are like most students, sociology is a new and somewhat strange discipline to be studying. It is new in that few students entering college have even heard of it, and even fewer intend to major in it. It is strange in that there is virtually no topic which sociology does not touch and therefore it is difficult to see where the discipline is distinct from others. It is probably also the case that you are reading this book, and therefore taking this course because the degree you are interested in requires it. Or, it is part of the general education requirements for all students at your college. In other words, you *have* to take this course. Have you wondered why?

The answer lies in the fact that sociology is such a topically broad discipline. If there is a central focus it is the issues, problems, trials, and triumphs of people trying to get along with each other; in other words, human relationships. So, the discipline has something to say to people trying to get along in a structure called a family, or members of a team, or neighbors, or employees trying to figure out work relations. The point is, sociology is relevant wherever human relations are at work. It follows then, that an improved understanding of human relations should translate into better conduct of those relations. There are exceptions, of course, such as the manipulation of those relations for the benefit of some while at the expense of others. But the general point remains, sociology provides insights which are applicable to a wide array of human circumstances. . . .

Over the course of a semester most students will have one or both of the following experiences.

The first experience is that you will identify personally with one or more of the topics explored. You will see clearly what the discipline has to say about some aspect of human relations because you have actually experienced the phenomenon in question. For example, Emile Durkheim used the term *anomie* to describe the effects of radical social change on people. He was writing about the effects of mass migration from the countryside to the city in early 20th century France. On the surface such

ideas seem remote, but in class they become real as the concept is applied to our own experiences. In the case of students, nearly all experience some degree of anomie when they first encounter college or, for that matter, when they are “clueless” as to the reason they have to take sociology! The point is, the sociological concept does apply to your life. On a more topical level you have experienced sociologically relevant phenomena such as family, socialization, peer pressure, intergenerational relations, being hired and/or fired, death, crime and deviance, religion, commercials, prejudice, etc., etc., etc. Only if you have not experienced such phenomena is sociology irrelevant to you.

The second experience is that most students will take a genuine interest in at least one of the topics covered. It could be the role of women in big business, the changing demographic face of America, the impact of new technologies on work, family life, and leisure, or issues such as universal health care and social security for the aged. Related to this last point, my introductory students participate in a one-hour a week elder visitation program. In this program students are paired with senior citizens from all over town and they simply visit. Most students groan, excessively, about this assignment prior to engaging in it. However, most report that the experience was a valuable one by the time the semester is completed. Often, students continue visiting their new friend after the course is completed. They found that something they had not really considered, intergenerational relations, really was interesting. The point here is, you will most likely find *something* interesting to the point that study of it is no longer a chore, but becomes an aspect of study and life you actually like or enjoy.

Now, take the two experiences, coming across something you have personally experienced and discovering something of special interest, and combine them. The result, while not necessarily an epiphany . . . , it is nonetheless potentially significant. Your level of interest in sociology, or at least some topic within the field has been raised. Evidence of this comes from friends and often family who notice a difference in the way their friend or child (you) now sees and talks about the world. Some will say that now you use “big” words! This will most likely happen to you. As this happens you then begin to raise questions about yourself and your place in the scheme of things. This is natural, it is to be expected, and it is a indicator of maturity. You are becoming more conscious of what is happening to and around you. You are now in a position to be an active participant in your and other people’s lives, rather than being primarily acted upon by others. We call this empowerment.

## Step #2: “OK, I’m Interested, But is There a Future for Me in Sociology?”

It is the *extremely* rare student who comes out of high school with their mind made up to study sociology in college. The number is something like 3 out of every 10,000 (Howery, 1985). Yikes! If it were not for the requirements most colleges impose on students you would find a lot of academic sociologists roaming the streets. . . .

What I am suggesting, is it could happen to you; you could choose to major in sociology. It has happened to others. The question is, how should you respond? What type of questions should you ask? How does one go about pursuing sociology as a major? Is there a future in sociology? This choice, making sociology your major, or part of a double major, is a critical choice, and should not be made lightly. . . .

In my experience once the typical student decides on sociology there develops a sense of energy and anticipation about the future. But the future is as much on the collective minds of parents as it is on the mind of the son or daughter. At some point the student tells Mom and Dad what their interests are and what their decision is. And, Mom and Dad do what good parents should do; they test the decision. Recently I had lunch with a parent of [a] junior sociology major who is interested in a career in criminal justice. This parent and I have had several in-depth discussions about his son. At one point the father said, “The bottom line is, will my son be able to get a job when he graduates? By that time we will have spent \$60,000 on his education. That’s quite an investment. We want to make sure he has a future.” Such sentiment is valid and is to be expected. . . .

Now back to the question regarding the future. The short answer is, yes, there is a future. And it is a future which is bright and growing brighter as time passes. It is bright because people with vision have begun to take the central and universal ideas of sociology and have begun looking for ways to put them into action. This effort in itself is neither new nor unique. Many other disciplines have been doing this for decades or centuries. Some have been doing this for years, but with tools and concepts derived from sociology. Marketing experts, political pollsters, etc., have been employing basic survey research techniques and statistical procedures developed over time in sociology for very practical purposes. It is also the case that sociology has developed and given birth to whole new disciplines such as criminal justice/criminology, gerontology, women’s studies, black studies, demography, and social work. Each of

these has put the discipline to work in very specific ways. Now sociology as a discipline, and sociologists as a profession are asserting their collective strengths. And, we find that more and more these strengths are finding expression and applications outside the classroom. . . .

In 1988 the U.S. Office of Personal Management established a position-classification standard for sociology. This means that the federal government officially recognizes the specific contributions which sociology can make. The standard for "Sociology GS-184" begins with the following statement:

This series includes positions which involve professional work requiring a knowledge of sociology and sociological methods specifically related to the establishment, validation, interpretation, and application of knowledge about social processes. Sociologists study specialized areas such as: changes in the character, size, distribution, and composition of the population; social mechanisms for enforcing compliance with widely accepted norms and for controlling deviance; social phenomena having to do with human health and disease; the structure and operation of organizations; and the complex inter-relationship of the individual and society.

Sociologists are concerned primarily with the study of patterns of group and organizational behavior, social interaction, and social situations in which interaction occurs. The emphasis is on the patterns of behavior that are characteristic of social groups, organizations, institutions, and nations. Some sociologists perform sociological research, others apply sociological principles and findings, and some perform a combination of both kinds of work.

Based on this standard five specializations are recommended, including demography, law and social control, medical sociology, organizational analysis, and social psychology. In addition the standard advises prospective applicants that sociology is appropriate education for work in other areas such as but not limited to:

- GS-020 Community Planning Series
- GS-101 Social Work Series
- GS-131 International Relations Series
- GS-135 Foreign Agricultural Affairs Series
- GS-140 Manpower Research and Analysis Series
- GS-142 Manpower Development Series
- GS-160 Civil Rights Analysis Series
- GS-185 Social Work Series
- GS-230 Employee Relations Series
- GS-685 Public Health Program Specialist Series
- GS-696 Consumer Safety Series
- GS-1150 Industrial Specialist Series

The prospects have further brightened to the point where over the last ten years new associations of sociologists who work primarily in non-academic settings have been established and are flourishing. These would include organizations such as:

- The Society for Applied Sociology
- The Sociological Practice Association
- The Chicago Sociological Practice Association
- The District of Columbia Sociological Society
- The Sociologists in Business
- The Sociological Practice Section of the American Sociological Association

What follows is a partial listing of non-academic settings where sociologists are currently employed, compiled from the directories of the associations just referenced (Stephens, 1994):

#### **Where Sociological Practitioners Work:**

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| A.C. Nielsen                          | General Electric                             |
| American Bar Association              | General Foods                                |
| American Express                      | General Motors Research Laboratories         |
| American International Group          | Hughes Aircraft Co.                          |
| American Medical Association          | Hutchings Psychiatric Center                 |
| Argonne National Laboratory           | Illinois Criminal Justice Authority          |
| Army Research Institute               | Internal Revenue Service                     |
| AT&T                                  | KMPC Peat Marwick                            |
| Atari                                 | Litigation Sciences, Inc.                    |
| Avon Products Inc.                    | Mayatech Corporation                         |
| Boys Town Center                      | NASA   |
| CBS, Inc.                             | National Analysts                            |
| Citibank, N.A.                        | National Institutes of Health                |
| City of Chicago Department of Housing | NBC  |
| Cleveland Clinic                      | New York Business Group on Health            |
| Equitable Life                        | New York City Fire Department                |
| Federation of Protestant Churches     | New York City Human Resources Administration |
| Financial News Network                |  |
| G.S. Searle Laboratories              |  |
| General Accounting Office             |  |

Rand Corporation	U.S. Bureau of the Census
Rockefeller Foundation	U.S. Department of Agriculture
Rubbermaid Inc.	U.S. Department of Energy
Saint Vincents Hospital	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Sears, Roebuck, & Co.	Wells Fargo Bank
Standard and Poor	Xerox
The Equitable	Young & Rubican
The Gallup Organization	
The Public Health Foundation	
The Vanderveer Group	

As you can see, there is great variety to the job settings. There is similar variety to non-academic job titles, as evidenced by the GS-184 series standard. But how do you translate the potential of a discipline like sociology into an actual career? The parent with the \$60,000 invested in his son appreciates potential, but how can his son go from degree to job? Does one just look for "sociologist wanted" job ads? Is graduate school necessary? Even if a job is available and you take it, can you make a living? . . .

### Step #3: "What Will I Achieve?"

. . . The goal is not to make you into a professional sociologist per se. It is to pass on to you significant skills and perspectives, and a legacy which makes you a thoughtful, and therefore an empowered person.

Whatever career dreams you have, consider the following. Your work options can be divided broadly into two categories, or worlds. One is the world of people. The other is the world of things. Now examine your interests and your dreams. Do you see these as focused primarily on people, or is your focus primarily on technical matters, things. My brother used to say that he was going into medicine so that he could deal with concrete issues, exact answers. He could not stand the ambiguity of any of the other "philosophies." Now he has been a practicing rural family physician for nearly 10 years. When asked about concrete issues he admits that nearly all of what he does is a matter of judgement. His position in the community and his reputation are as much a part of his profession as knowing how to deliver babies. The point is, you must think hard and creatively to come up with a career that does not bring you into

close contact with others. The argument could be made that on this basis there is no career that cannot be profited by a sociological perspective. This is not to say that sociology should therefore be your degree of choice. But it does suggest that there is a significant contribution sociology can make to any career. . . .

### Step #4: "Now . . . What Do I Do Next?"

. . . You are beginning! So, in what ways can you begin? Let's start by noting three common elements among the CP's [character profiles of employed sociologists].

First, the CP's evidenced an increasingly common development in modern careers: they are characterized by change. If you do not expect change in your work life then you will most certainly be left "holding the short end" when it comes to career development. In fact, the idea of a career developing implies change. The difference now is that the changes to be expected are generally more radical than in the past. Look back at the CP's and you will see frequent career turns and shifts. These occur within and across job categories. This means both advancement within a job type and organization, as well as movement from one type of work to another. Besides job changes, CP subjects are primed for life changes. The fact is, our lives are made complicated by the presence of others. Because of this we can expect circumstances, especially our relations to others, to be always in some state of flux. As some CP subjects suggested, ten years ago the issues were not AIDS, sexual harassment, diversity in the work place, a world turned upside-down by the collapse of the Soviet Union, an aging population, foreign economic competition, etc. The sociologist, because of his/her ability to see the "big picture" is in a favorable position to see, or anticipate these trends in their early stages.

A second common element among CP's is a commitment to education and continued learning. In fact, the CP's evidence great diversity, and therefore breadth of perspective, in degrees earned. Bachelor level degrees were earned in fields such as biology, education, nuclear engineering and physics, history, chemistry, and business, as well as sociology. Advanced degrees were earned in fields such as law, criminal justice, business, and communications. Beside, formal degrees, many CP subjects have taken advantage of seminars and professional associations in order to stay on top of their professions. The point is, sociology is a discipline

which promotes continuation of the learning process, both in perspective and practice.

The third element in common is what I call opportunism. Because sociologists combine both an anticipation of change with an orientation and an ability to learn, then opportunism is produced. For many of us, an opportunity is something which simply happens. However, an appropriate orientation can produce opportunities. There are three important steps to producing opportunities: These are, 1) actively looking for opportunities, 2) recognizing opportunities when they appear, and 3) taking advantage of opportunities once they are recognized. For example, networking is one way in which opportunities are produced. We all have networks but the question is whether the network is actively operated. If you understand the concept you can employ it, if not then opportunities are limited. . . .

The three elements in common among the CP's, understanding change, pursuing education, and being opportunistic, are only part of the story. Other characteristics possessed by those with successful careers include personal traits such as perseverance and a willingness to work hard. . . .

The reason for reviewing these characteristics is to emphasize that your career is the result of a set of *conscious choices* and *actions*. The better your insights and information about the circumstances you are in, the better your choices and subsequent actions will serve your interests. But this is likely only when you begin the process of taking responsibility for your own future. If you recall, . . . I told you about a parent who was concerned about the career prospects of their son's \$60,000 college education. The problem is, dollars invested and career development do not smoothly correlate; that is, one does not automatically translate into the other. You must put yourself in a position where you can exercise opportunism. . . . But how is this done?

### Step #5: The Objective is Relevance

. . . It has not been my intent to talk you into making sociology your academic major or your career. I do believe, however, that sociology can significantly enhance any career you choose. . . . But more than this, take what you learn from the classroom . . . to your life outside the classroom. Be aggressive about it. Ask questions. See what others who have gone

before you have experienced. Ask your professor to bring alumni to class. Write to the ASA and begin researching the careers of other sociologists. Ask the questions you have written in the margins. Challenge the common assumptions. Expect change. Learn about your world. Be optimistic. Your future is not a simple statistical function of chance. It is a function of conscious choice and intentional action. Therefore, look for the opportunities, see the opportunities, and seize the opportunities.

Ultimately the objective is relevance. You want yourself, your life, your work and career to be meaningful, to make a difference. . . . And that is the beauty of the discipline. It can be relevant regardless of the circumstance. However, you must be prepared, you must be responsible, you must articulate some values around which your future can be focused. Mere activity is meaningless. A job for a job's sake will not take you far. But through this course . . . you have begun a process of consciously choosing and producing a life characterized by relevance and meaning.

### Study Questions

1. What are some of the typical jobs sociologists do with their degree?
2. What are the prospects for "income" and for "meaning" with a career in sociology, according to Stephens?

### References

- Carla Hoxery, "Teaching High School Sociology," ASA Footnotes, p. 13, no. 4, 1985.  
 W. Richard Stephens, Jr., from "What Now? The Relevance of Sociology to Your Life and Career," in *Using Sociology* (2nd ed.), Roger A. Straus, Editor. General Hall, Inc., 1994.

Sociology students pursue careers in a variety of fields: business, child welfare, computer industry, criminal justice, education (teaching, evaluation research, consultation, research), gerontology, health care, international relations, law, law enforcement, leisure/recreation/sport, military/military intelligence, social work, and urban planning or management, and more. To learn more about career opportunities for sociology students