



# Why Study Sociology?

Bởi:

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*The research of sociologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark helped the Supreme Court decide to end “separate but equal” racial segregation in schools in the United States. (Photo courtesy of public domain)*

When Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957, she was met by an angry crowd. But she knew she had the law on her side. Three years earlier in the landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case, the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned 21 state laws that allowed blacks and whites to be taught in separate school systems as long as the school systems were “equal.” One of the major factors influencing that decision was research conducted by the husband-and-wife team of sociologists, Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Their research showed that segregation was harmful to young black schoolchildren, and the Court found that harm to be unconstitutional.

Since it was first founded, many people interested in sociology have been driven by the scholarly desire to contribute knowledge to this field, while others have seen it as way not only to study society, but also to improve it. Besides desegregation, sociology has played a crucial role in many important social reforms such as equal opportunity for women in the workplace, improved treatment for individuals with mental handicaps or learning disabilities, increased accessibility and accommodation for people with physical handicaps, the right of native populations to preserve their land and culture, and prison system reforms.

The prominent sociologist Peter L. Berger (1929– ), in his 1963 book *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, describes a sociologist as “someone concerned

with understanding society in a disciplined way." He asserts that sociologists have a natural interest in the monumental moments of people's lives, as well as a fascination with banal, everyday occurrences. Berger also describes the "aha" moment when a sociological theory becomes applicable and understood:

"[T]here is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don't people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms—until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology. (Berger 1963)"

Sociology can be exciting because it teaches people ways to recognize how they fit into the world and how others perceive them. Looking at themselves and society from a sociological perspective helps people see where they connect to different groups based on the many different ways they classify themselves and how society classifies them in turn. It raises awareness of how those classifications—such as economic and status levels, education, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—affect perceptions.

Sociology teaches people not to accept easy explanations. It teaches them a way to organize their thinking so that they can ask better questions and formulate better answers. It makes people more aware that there are many different kinds of people in the world who do not necessarily think the way they do. It increases their willingness and ability to try to see the world from other people's perspectives. This prepares them to live and work in an increasingly diverse and integrated world.

## **Sociology in the Workplace**

Employers continue to seek people with what are called "transferable skills." This means that they want to hire people whose knowledge and education can be applied in a variety of settings and whose skills will contribute to various tasks. Studying sociology can provide people with this wide knowledge and a skill set that can contribute to many workplaces, including:

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- an understanding of social systems and large bureaucracies,
- the ability to devise and carry out research projects to assess whether a program or policy is working,
- the ability to collect, read, and analyze statistical information from polls or surveys,
- the ability to recognize important differences in people's social, cultural, and economic backgrounds,
- skills in preparing reports and communicating complex ideas,

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- the capacity for critical thinking about social issues and problems that confront modern society. (Department of Sociology, University of Alabama)

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Sociology prepares people for a wide variety of careers. Besides actually conducting social research or training others in the field, people who graduate from college with a degree in sociology are hired by government agencies and corporations in fields such as social services, counseling (e.g., family planning, career, substance abuse), community planning, health services, marketing, market research, and human resources. Even a small amount of training in sociology can be an asset in careers like sales, public relations, journalism, teaching, law, and criminal justice.

### Please “Friend” Me: Students and Social Networking

The phenomenon known as Facebook was designed specifically for students. Whereas earlier generations wrote notes in each other’s printed yearbooks at the end of the academic year, modern technology and the internet ushered in dynamic new ways for people to interact socially. Instead of having to meet up on campus, students can call, text, and Skype from their dorm rooms. Instead of a study group gathering weekly in the library, online forums and chat rooms help learners connect. The availability and immediacy of computer technology has forever changed the ways students engage with each other.

Now, after several social networks have vied for primacy, a few have established their place in the market and some have attracted niche audience. While Facebook launched the social networking trend geared toward teens and young adults, now people of all ages are actively “friending” each other. LinkedIn distinguished itself by focusing on professional connections, serving as a virtual world for workplace networking. Newer offshoots like Foursquare help people connect based on the real-world places they frequent, while Twitter has cornered the market on brevity.

These newer modes of social interaction have also spawned harmful consequences, such as cyberbullying and what some call FAD, or Facebook Addiction Disorder. Researchers have also examined other potential negative impacts, such as whether Facebooking lowers a student’s GPA, or whether there might be long-term effects of replacing face-to-face interaction with social media.

All of these social networks demonstrate emerging ways that people interact, whether positive or negative. They illustrate how sociological topics are alive and changing today. Social media will most certainly be a developing topic in the study of sociology for decades to come.

## Summary

Studying sociology is beneficial both for the individual and for society. By studying sociology people learn how to think critically about social issues and problems that confront our society. The study of sociology enriches students' lives and prepares them for careers in an increasingly diverse world. Society benefits because people with sociological training are better prepared to make informed decisions about social issues and take effective action to deal with them.

## Section Quiz

Kenneth and Mamie Clark used sociological research to show that segregation was:

1. beneficial
2. harmful
3. illegal
4. of no importance

B

Studying Sociology helps people analyze data because they learn:

1. interview techniques
2. to apply statistics
3. to generate theories
4. all of the above

D

Berger describes sociologists as concerned with:

1. monumental moments in people's lives
2. common everyday life events
3. both a and b
4. none of the above

C

## Short Answer

How do you think taking a sociology course might affect your social interactions?

Why Study Sociology?

What sort of career are you interested in? How could studying sociology help you in this career?

### **Further Research**

Social communication is rapidly evolving due to ever improving technologies. To learn more about how sociologists study the impact of these changes check out <http://www.sociologyguide.com/basic-concepts/sociology-of-media.php>

### **References**

Berger, Peter L. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. New York: Anchor Books.

Department of Sociology, University of Alabama. N.d. *Why Study Sociology: A Practical Guide*. Huntsville: University of Alabama. Retrieved January 19, 2012 (<http://www.uah.edu/colleges/liberal/sociology/pdf/Web%20Brochure.Why%20Soc.pdf>).