

Dec-1984

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William C. Levin
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation

Levin, William C. (1984). Editor's Notebook: Yes, But What Do You Really Do?. *Bridgewater Review*, 3(1), 1.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol3/iss1/3

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Yes, But What Do You REALLY Do?

by William C. Levin

Though I love what I do for a living, I regret that I must report a small occupational glitch. It's just that non-sociologists, who greatly outnumber us lucky folks, don't seem to know what sociology is, and don't seem to care that they don't. I understand that those who have not studied sociology may find it vaguely defined at best. But put yourself in my position. Telling a new acquaintance that I am a sociologist is a sure-fire conversation stopper. It's almost as bad as having to admit you're a poet.

I have decided, therefore, to try to do something about this. So, given the luxury of writing in this space pretty much what I please, I plan to plug my field, without turning current readers into "formers." To accomplish this, I will simply hitch my explanation of sociology to the discipline of physics which, though not normally understood by the general public any better than is sociology, never has its legitimacy questioned.

The physical forces that operate in our world are normally invisible. You can't see gravity, though you can observe its influence on objects. Apples fall (bless them for their consistency in doing so) and the rate of their descent to earth can be measured. From such events the existence of a physical force was inferred by Isaac Newton several hundred years ago. A person who denies the existence of gravity, merely because it cannot be directly observed, does so at his or her own peril. Although our understanding of how physical forces influence everyday events, such as flying on jet planes or boiling water, is typically vague, our respect for physics is assured by our faith that such forces exist.

Sociology should be understood in the same way. Just as there are physical forces that influence the behavior of objects, there are social forces that influence the way we deal with one another. Like gravity, social forces cannot be directly observed. Their existence must be inferred from the behavior of people toward one another, which is just

what Emile Durkheim recognized in the Nineteenth Century.

Just as surely as Newton discovered gravity, Durkheim (and others) discovered social forces. Much of our behavior toward one another is due to our membership in groups,



*Etching by Ildiko Vincze
Class of 1980*

You have just stood in line at the Motor Vehicle Bureau for two hours only to find that you lack one measly form to complete your registration. The lady behind the counter seems almost gleeful to be given the chance to inform you of this fact. Most Americans would say she was a rotten person. They would point to her individual qualities, such as they are.

The sociological view, however, focuses on the situation in which she works. Bureau-not to what we are like as individuals. Let me give two examples.

cracies, with their rigid, boring routines, not only kill the creativity and responsibility in individuals, they also provide otherwise pleasant people with good reason to be nasty. Once she leaves work, that Motor Vehicle clerk probably goes bowling and drinks beer to the greater glory of Fred's Automotive, or bakes peach cobbler for the needy.

We Americans traditionally put such emphasis on individual responsibility for success and failure that every behavior we observe is accounted for by individual qualities like cleverness, hard work, luck, confidence, aggressiveness and so on. But sociologists have shown that human behavior is often shaped by forces much more powerful than individual characteristics. Nasty behavior may have much more to do with a nasty social situation than with a nasty personality.

For a second example, take the all-too familiar case of divorce. Typically, Americans attribute the failure of a marriage to the failures of the individuals involved. Was he too demanding, or she too materialistic? But even a cursory look beyond individuals reveals that there are social forces at work here. Our culture stresses individual achievement, self-improvement, personal "space." Inflation has made it increasingly necessary for both partners in a marriage to work. The growing cultural norm for sexual equality has changed our ideas about what a marriage should be, and some people are caught with outdated beliefs.

We are no more divorce-prone as individuals today in comparison with Americans of twenty years ago. We simply live in a time in which the social forces make for higher divorce rates. When we consult marriage counselors who are trained in psychology, and the overwhelming majority of counselors are, we inevitably focus our attention and energies on a very limited range of ways to explain and deal with divorce. We need additionally to understand the powerful social forces which are the sociologist's special area of expertise.

I admit that in this space I can only provide a sketchy explanation for why I find sociology compelling. Then again if you only had this much space to learn about physics you wouldn't get beyond the story of falling apples. I'm afraid you will have to take my word for the fact that attention to social forces can provide powerful and absorbing explanations for everyday human behavior. It is a greatly underutilized resource.