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Sociology and Social Change

Week 8 Monday — When the explanation is not in the individual

NRES 315: Human Dimensions of Fish and Wildlife Management

Last updated: October 12, 2026

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Last week we looked inside the person

Psychology asked what a person believes, intends, and feels, and what the situation in front of them allows.

This week the unit of analysis changes.

Sociology asks about the patterns that exist beyond any one person — and that shape what any individual can believe, intend, or do.

Source: Chapter 9, §9.2

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Today's question

When thousands of people give the same individual reason, what are we actually looking at?

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.2

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What you should be able to do

By the end of today, you should be able to:

- distinguish **structure** and **agency**, and explain why you need both;
- define a **social fact** and distinguish a private **trouble** from a public **issue**;
- explain **social construction** and give a fish-and-wildlife example; and
- define **social order** and **social change**.

Source: Chapter 9, §§9.3.1–9.3.5

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Structure and agency

Society shapes behavior, but behavior also shapes society.

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.1

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Two words, one relationship

Structure	Agency
The stable, patterned relationships among societal elements that influence human action: institutions, roles, norms.	The capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices.

Structuration: people's interactions create and renegotiate structures, while individuals act within the contexts those structures produce.

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.1

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The river and its banks

A river's **banks** guide its **flow**.

The flow gradually **reshapes the banks**.

Society influences human behavior while individuals actively reshape society.

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.1

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Applied: why did participation change?

A sociologist asks structural questions:

- Has urbanization made the landscape harder to access?
- Have rural communities — traditionally a primary source of social support for hunting — declined in population?
- Have those areas changed in **character**, even where headcount held?

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.1 and Box 9.1

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Social facts

Social facts are shared ways of thinking, behaving, and organizing society that exist independently of any one individual.

They influence how people think and act, often without us recognizing their influence.

Examples: Social norms, laws

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.2

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Durkheim (1897): From Individual Decisions to Social Patterns

Suicide is an intensely personal act. Yet suicide rates differ across societies, social groups, and historical periods.

Durkheim argued that these differences reflect social conditions, particularly how strongly individuals are connected to and regulated by society.

To understand why suicide rates differ among groups, we must look beyond individual circumstances to the social conditions that shape behavior.

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.2

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Personal troubles and public issues

C. Wright Mills (1959)

Personal troubles	Public issues
Problems experienced by individuals within their immediate lives and relationships.	Problems rooted in broader social, economic, or institutional conditions that affect populations.
Example: A hunter loses access to a favorite hunting property.	*Example:* Increasing land development and changes in land ownership reduce hunting access across a region.

Understanding personal experiences often requires examining the broader social conditions that shape them.

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Social construction

The process through which people collectively create and maintain shared meanings, categories, and understandings of the world.

These meanings can change across cultures and over time.

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.3

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Game fish and rough fish

Both are real animals. The **categories** are social constructs.

- "Game fish" are constructed as desirable, so policy promotes them: creel, length, and gear limits.
- "Rough fish," often **native** species, are constructed as less valuable — so many go unregulated entirely: no creel, bag, or gear limit.

Saying a category is socially constructed does not mean it is imaginary. It means the agreement is what produces the regulation.

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.3

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What is not socially constructed

Gravity. Temperature. Thermodynamics.

Professionals constantly negotiate the tension between biophysical realities that no belief can alter and social constructions that determine what we do about them.

Source: Chapter 9, §9.3.3

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Social order and social change

Social order: the structures, institutions, facts, and constructs that maintain stability — and which can also produce inequalities of status, role, and position.

Social change: transformation of basic social structures and institutions over time, often originating in economics, politics, technology, or natural realities.

Source: Chapter 9, §§9.3.4–9.3.5

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Pair rehearsal: trouble or issue?

With a partner, decide which each is, and name the structural question you would ask:

1. "I lost my hunting spot when the neighbor sold the farm."
2. 63% of lapsed hunters in a county say they have "nowhere to go."
3. "I don't have time anymore."
4. Commuting over 30 minutes rose from 19% to 46% of county residents.

Source: Chapter 9, §§3.2

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Wednesday and Friday

Wednesday: the three sociological perspectives, plus socialization, identity, community, place, and stratification.

Before Friday: read the **Week 08 Case Brief: Who Still Hunts Cedar County?** It is a separate document in the Canvas module and is required preparation.

Source: Chapter 9, §§9.4–9.6

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Close

A widespread pattern of personal troubles calls for examining social conditions. Individual experience and structural explanation belong together.

Source: Chapter 9, §§3.2

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