I. **What is Sociology?**
Before we begin talking about what sociology is, let’s talk about what it isn’t.

**A. Sociology is not Social Work**
1. A lot of times when you tell people you are studying sociology they immediately assume that it is Social Work, or you are interested in Social Work, that you like to work with people. Whether this be the case or not, that is not sociology.
2. Sociology, in its most basic definition is the scientific study of human behavior that is shaped by society. We will go into much greater detail next week, but at this point it is important for you to realize that sociology is a more academic, scientific, and theoretical field than social work – which is more practical. This is not to say that sociology can’t be applied to many practical situations – as we go through the semester you will see that sociology helps everyone understand their own lives and their relation to the rest of the world.

**B. Science: Natural vs. Social Sciences**
1. Okay, I mentioned the fact that sociology is the scientific study of society and it’s influence on human behavior. What do I mean my scientific?
   a. In general, science is a set of systematic methods used to study the social and natural worlds. Science is also the knowledge obtained by those methods.
   b. Has anyone ever heard of the scientific method – maybe in chemistry, biology, etc.?
   c. This is a standard sequence of steps in formulating and answering questions. (Asking a Question, Identifying Important Factors, Formulating a Hypothesis, Collecting Relevant Information, Testing the Hypothesis)
   d. Objective / Value Free – Not always possible, strive for it, Weber, etc…
   e. Thus, Sociology uses these standard methods to study society and human behavior in groups in that society.
2. The Goals of Science
   There are certain goals that scientific inquiry has that define it as a discipline
   a. The first goal of science is to explain why something happens.
   b. The second goal is to make generalizations – to go beyond the individual case and make statements that apply to a broader group or situation. To achieve generalizations, scientists of all types look for patterns, reoccurring characteristics or events.
   c. The third goal is to predict, to specify what will happen in the future in the light of current knowledge.
3. There is a divide in science between the *Natural* and *Social Sciences*.
   a. The *Natural Sciences* are disciplines designed to understand, explain, and predict events in our natural environment. These disciplines are divided into specialized fields based on what they are studying. For example, biology, chemistry, physics, etc… These are also divided into even narrower fields. Each of these areas of investigation examines a particular slice of nature.
   b. The *Social Sciences*, on the other hand, focus on the social world -- they examine human relationships. Like the natural sciences, social science attempts to be objective when looking for patterns and relationships that arise between people in society. The social sciences are also divided into specialized fields like psychology, economics, poli sci, etc…

C. **How Sociology is different than other disciplines**
   1. In order for you to get a better idea of what sociology is, I will compare it to other social scientific fields:
      
      a. *Political Science*: Political science focuses on politics and government. Political scientists study how people govern themselves: the various forms of government, their structures, and their relationships to other institutions of society. Political scientists are especially interested in how people attain ruling positions in their society, how they maintain those positions, and the consequences of their activities for those who are governed. In studying a constitutional government, such as that of the United States, political scientists also analyze voting behavior.
      
      b. *Economics*: Economics also concentrates on a single social institution. Economists study the production and distribution of the material goods and services of a society. They want to know what goods are being produced at what rate and at what cost, and how those goods are distributed. They also are interested in the choices that determine production and consumption; for example, why a society produces a certain item instead of another.
      
      c. *Anthropology*: Anthropology, in which the primary focus has been preliterate or tribal peoples, is the sister discipline of sociology. The chief concern of anthropologists is to understand culture, a people's total way of life. Culture includes (1) the group's artifacts such as its tools, art, and weapons; (2) the group's structure, that is, the hierarchy and other patterns that determine how its members interact with one another; (3) a group's ideas and values, especially how its belief system affects people's lives; and (4) the group's forms of communication, especially language. The anthropologists' traditional focus on tribal groups is now giving way to the study of groups in industrialized settings.
d. **Psychology**: The focus of psychology is on processes that occur within the individual, within the skin-bound organism. "Psychologists are primarily concerned with mental processes: intelligence, emotions, perception, and memory. Some concentrate on attitudes and values; others focus on personality, mental aberration (psychopathology, or mental illness), and how individuals cope with the problems they face.

e. **Sociology**: Sociology has many similarities to the other social sciences.

- Like political scientists, sociologists also study how people govern one another, especially the impact of various forms of government on people's lives. Like economists, sociologists are concerned with what happens to the goods and services of a society -- but sociologists place their focus on the social consequences of production and distribution.

- Like anthropologists, sociologists study culture; they have a particular interest in the social consequences of material goods, group structure, and belief systems, as well as in how people communicate with one another.

- Like psychologists, sociologists are also concerned with how people adjust to the difficulties of life.

2. Given these overall similarities, then, what distinguishes sociology from the other social sciences?

a. Unlike political scientists and economists, sociologists do not concentrate on a single social institution.

b. Unlike anthropologists, sociologists focus primarily on industrialized societies.

c. And unlike psychologists, sociologists stress factors external to the individual to determine what influences people.