

THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE...

The early 20th century American sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley, opens the door to this perspective in two succinct sentences:

An individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals.... "Society" and "individuals" do not denote separable phenomena, but are simply collective and distributive aspects of the same thing....

This is an excellent place to begin articulating the unique vantage point of the sociological perspective.

But Cooley is mistaken here in two important ways:

- 1) the first is that we believe that we do know and experience individuals;
- 2) the second is that we believe that we experience these individuals not as abstractions but as real, concrete entities, i.e., not as role players, status set occupants, or social actors, but as real physical and distinct persons.

We believe these things because of the human tendency toward what philosopher John Dewey called “misplaced concreteness” as well as to what some wag called the “hardening of the categories.”

That is, we tend to see the world in terms of its immediate, physical appearance, and since people appear to come individually packaged in separate corporal containers called bodies we mistakenly conclude that people are such separate entities.

And once committed to these mistaken perceptions, we tend to persist in them, often oblivious to all kinds of evidence to the contrary.