Bringing a Sociological Worldview to Weather and Society*Integrated Studies (WAS*IS) Work

by Thomas Behler*

I’d like to begin by telling a story about the most important formative event in my life—the experience that sparked my passion for all things meteorological. To set the stage for my story, I must begin by pointing out that I have been legally blind since birth.

When I was 9 or 10, growing up in central Pennsylvania, one particularly warm and humid summer evening brought us a severe thunderstorm which became one of the most incredible and fascinating weather events I had witnessed as a boy. The kind of continuous lightning and thunder we experienced that night was somewhat rare in our area, more typically occurring in the Midwest or the South.

As I stood by a large picture window in our living room, I could see the lightning flashes traversing the sky, followed by tremendous, deafening crashes of thunder. I was totally awestruck by what my senses were experiencing. Why, you may ask, was this of such profound significance to me? Because, simply put, that storm was the last thing I remember seeing as a child, and for the entire rest of my life.

Born prematurely in 1954, I suffered from a condition caused by overexposure to oxygen in the hours after my birth, which destroyed the retinas of my eyes. The doctors explained that the condition, called “retinopathy of prematurity,” allowed just a very small piece of the retinas in each eye to survive the initial overexposure. But that survival was only temporary. Shortly after that stormy summer evening, atrophy destroyed those remaining retinal fragments, and took with it my potential to see anything ever again.

The memorable storm gave me what could be described as my first lesson in sociology, although it wasn’t until many years later that I understood the lesson and its significance. The lesson embodies two major sociological concepts—“norms” and “role strain.” Norms are a central component of the culture of any society. They represent the specific rules of social living that guide people’s behavior in everyday life situations. With regard to norms, I had clearly violated basic social norms governing what one should and should not do during a severe thunderstorm. Standing in front of that picture window with the ferocious storm on the other side of the glass was dangerous and potentially life-threatening. But I simply could not pull myself away.

Furthermore, my parents encountered role strain as they tried to decide what to do about their inquisitive and temporarily irrational child. The social structure of any society contains roles, or expected behavioral patterns that are associated with each status that a person occupies. In simple terms, role strain occurs when conflicting demands or expectations are built into a single role. In this case it was the parental role that displayed the strain. Should my parents take the chance, let me stand by that window, and allow me to enjoy this once-in-a-lifetime experience? Or should they pull me away to protect me from actual or potential harm? Fortunately, my parents chose the first approach, for which I am eternally grateful.

My story is an excellent illustration of what I like to call “the sociological view of the world,” which basically argues that no person is an island. Instead, everything each of us experiences can be analyzed in broader sociological terms. Understanding these terms helps us to fully appreciate the overall effect of these life events. To state this worldview in another way, the sociologist asserts that many of our most private or personal experiences aren’t really all that private or personal. Instead, they are common to many others in the world, and are shaped by social forces that lie beyond the individual’s control. This sociological view of the world was perhaps best described in the early days of the discipline by a sociologist named C. Wright Mills in his book The Sociological Imagination (1959). According to Mills, we must take a broader view of any situation we experience (“the sociological imagination”). Drawing on our sociological imagination allows us to better understand our life experiences and our problems, along with the larger social forces that may be shaping them.

More specifically, Mills argued that, in trying to understand why we find ourselves in certain situations, or why we may feel trapped and unable to control our environment, we tend to seek answers by explaining things in purely private or personal terms. We’re often unaware of the larger historical,
Security (continued from page 8)

investing there?”, and establishing some tentative relationships between the changes taking place in the natural environment and shifting demographics, regional economics, and U.S. and Canadian security concerns. We invite dialogue among our weather and societal impacts colleagues as a means of opening up fruitful interchanges of information between our respective areas of study.

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References


Sociology (continued from page 3)

social, political, and economic forces that shape our individual lives on a fundamental level. When we deal with the problems and realities facing humankind, we must recognize and take these larger forces into account. Once we master this more broad-based sociological view, we become able to better understand our individual experiences in terms of the broader social picture.

To tie these concepts to WAS*IS work, let’s suppose that a tornado has just torn through a community. That tornado is much more than a hardship for any one individual. It affects the community as a whole, and the community and its residents will respond collectively. Their ability to respond will depend largely on how well they were initially prepared for such an event. Furthermore, that collective response will likely shape future preparedness and response efforts not only in that community, but in surrounding communities as well.

In addition, the sociological imagination gives us a broader understanding of the need for large-scale solutions to major problems. These solutions must go well beyond reforming or changing any one person. Basic structural patterns or arrangements may need to be altered. One of the challenges of sociology is helping to determine what those alterations should be, and how they might be most effectively implemented.

To carry our tornado example further, we can argue that, although the tornado and its effects will be experienced as intensely personal hardships, the hardships are unlikely to be confronted or reduced effectively through personal therapy or psychological intervention. To solve these issues, we’ll need to change existing social structures and structural arrangements within the affected community. Possible strategies for change might be implementing a better community warning system, conducting severe (continued on page 11)
The seminal report entitled *Completing the Forecast* (NRC 2006) is now almost 3 years old. As called for in the report, it’s time for the NWS to acknowledge and assume a leadership role in turning the ship. Resources should be devoted to increase NWS support for those trained in social sciences (currently 0 full-time equivalent) even if at the expense of a more convenient digital forecast. It’s time to think less about the most convenient forecast and more about the best weather-related decisions... and how to more effectively communicate information to help the public make those decisions. In short, it’s time to complete the forecast instead of just talking about it.

The American Meteorological Society (AMS) has stepped up to the plate by forming the Ad Hoc Committee on Uncertainty in Forecasts (ACUF). But the NWS needs to help build a new ballpark—the old one contains too many obstructions. Members of the public have to peer around these obstacles, which can prevent them from seeing the entire field and being involved in the effort.

Few of us, who began our careers in meteorology 40+ years ago, could foresee the great advances that have been made in our science. Only by emphatically reaching out to other sciences and disciplines can we realize the great promise of our science—full utility to the public, our most important client. Numerical weather forecasting and digital systems have been critical to the advances of our science until now, and the next chapter in the application can be equally exciting. With effective leadership, I’m certain it can happen. The forecast can be completed.

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**Bibliography**


**Sociology (continued from page 9)**

weather awareness training for citizens, establishing viable shelter locations for displaced residents, and formulating a better overall community emergency operations plan.

Finally, the sociological imagination implies that if we want to understand why things have happened, and what we can do to improve the situation, we must examine the circumstances through a wide variety of viewpoints. Regardless of our own unique station in life, we must consider all viewpoints—from the less-advantaged segments of society, through an average, suburban middle-class citizen, to the rich and powerful. We also must consider the nature of the community or population of concern (e.g., a major inner-city area versus a rural farming community). The people in each economic situation or geographical area will have very different lifestyles, experiences, and outlooks on life.

In summary, the sociological view of the world gives us a broad and helpful mechanism for understanding many realities of life. Along with traditional concerns such as poverty, divorce, crime, prejudice, discrimination, and cultural conflicts, these realities can include the responses of people, organizations, and communities to weather forecasts, high-impact weather events, and even more mundane weather phenomena. These latter concerns, of course, are of central importance to the WAS*IS* initiative and to the basic goals of societal impacts research.

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**Reference**