

Putting the sociological literacy framework to work to understand unemployment

Stephanie Medley-Rath

Indiana University – Kokomo.
Email: smedleyr@iu.edu

Zach Rubin

Lander University.
Email: zrubin@lander.edu

Andrea Krieg

Elmhurst University.
Email: andrea.krieg@elmhurst.edu

Geogry T. Kordsmeier

Indiana University – Southeast.
Email: gkordsme@iu.edu

Nathan Palmer

Georgia Southern University.
Email: npalmer@georgiasouthern.edu

Jorge Sola

Complutense University of Madrid.
Email: jorgesola@cps.ucm.es

Abstract

This article introduces students to sociology as both a way of thinking and a set of skills to understand the social world. Using the Sociological Literacy Framework (SLF), we outline key sociological concepts: the sociological eye, social structure, socialization, stratification, social change and social reproduction. We show readers how sociologists apply these concepts to a central social issue: unemployment. Sociology shifts us from individualized to social explanations, encouraging us to recognize social patterns that shape social outcomes, like inequality. In addition, we highlight core sociological skills: applying theory, evaluating evidence, and analyzing data, which enable students to critically think about social phenomena and engage policy debates. Sociology is a field that equips students to develop critical thinking around the social forces shaping their lives.

Keywords: Sociological Literacy Framework; Unemployment; Sociological Eye; Social Structure; Introduction to Sociology.

Introduction

Imagine two people who both just lost their jobs. One quickly finds a new job, but the other struggles for months. It is easy to explain these different outcomes by focusing on individual choices—who worked harder, who made better decisions, or who was more prepared. But what if those explanations are only part of the story? What if forces outside of either individual's control, like the economy or where they live, shapes what happens next?

This is where sociology begins. Sociology is more than a subject you take for a requirement. It offers a way of seeing and understanding the world around you. Instead of focusing only on individual experiences, sociology asks you to look for patterns, connections, and social forces that shape those experiences. It helps you move from asking “Why did this happen to this person?” to asking “How do social conditions shape what happens to groups of people?”

Sociology is the scientific study of the behavior and attitudes of people and groups. Groups could be as small as two people (or a dyad) in a relationship (friends, spouses, co-workers), larger (members of church, students in the same class, or who share an interest). No matter the size, every group is composed of relationships that connect them to other groups and individuals, forming social structures. Sociologists focus on how these social structures affect individuals and the broader social world.

In this article, we introduce the Sociological Literacy Framework, a set of key concepts and skills that help you think like a sociologist. The Sociological Literacy Framework includes six concepts: the sociological eye, social structure, socialization, stratification, and social change and social reproduction. These concepts help you understand how individuals make choices and are shaped by social forces. In this article, we focus on applying sociological concepts to the problem of unemployment.

Sociology helps us ask questions about the world and is a set of skills to understand it. Sociological skills include being able to (1) apply sociological theories to real-world issues, (2) critically evaluate explanations of social behavior, (3) use scientific methods to study society, (4) evaluate the strengths and limitations of research methods and data, (5) analyze social science data, and (6) apply sociological knowledge to shape policy and public discourse (Ferguson & Carbonaro 2016; Ferguson 2016).

The skills developed through studying sociology allow us to explain many of the world's problems. For example, an unemployed person may be troubled by their inability to find a job. But there are often reasons that have nothing to do with the individual's skills or choices that make it hard for them to find work. For instance, unemployment is caused by having more job seekers than available jobs (Mills [1959]

2000). The number of available jobs is determined by broader social forces influenced by the behavior of CEOs who decide whether to hire or not, the introduction of generative AI, which can be used in place of some human labor, and so on. In other words, unemployment is caused by factors outside of any one individual's control. Sociology allows us to use systematic explanations to understand the experience of unemployment, to analyze unemployment data, to evaluate explanations for it, and to inform public policy to reduce unemployment and its negative effects.

The Sociological Eye

When you hear that someone is unemployed, it is easy to assume the reason is personal. You might think they are lazy, lack skills or credentials, or have made poor choices that led them to their situation. These explanations feel obvious because they focus on an individual's situation or reflect the circumstances of people we know. We tend to begin explaining unemployment by looking at the individual factors involved because we have been taught to look at what individuals do. But sociology invites us to pause and consider things from a different angle: how could we explain one person's unemployment by looking at broader societal and economic factors?

This shift in perspective is what sociologists call the **sociological eye**. Instead of focusing only on a single case, the sociological eye encourages you to zoom out and look for patterns across groups of people (Palmer and Schueths 2026). When you zoom out beyond the individual, unemployment starts to look quite different. You notice that unemployment rates vary by education level, race, and region. You see that the number of people unemployed rises and falls due to changes in the economy. Unemployment increases during economic recessions and decreases during periods of growth. You may also notice that people employed in certain industries or who live in specific communities are more or less likely to become unemployed.

In the United States unemployment rates vary by race. The unemployment rate for White people is 3.9 percent, for Black people it is 7.4 percent, for Asian Americans it is 4.3 percent, and for Hispanic people it is 5.4 percent. Unemployment varies by race

due to several factors. For example, between 2025 and 2026, Black women were more likely to become unemployed. Black women with college degrees are more likely to work in the public sector (such as the federal government). Due to the large cuts in the federal workforce over this period, Black women saw their unemployment rates increase more than other racial and gender groups (Wilson 2026). Today, the introduction of generative AI into the workforce threatens a whole host of careers, such as stock trading or computer programming, which are more often held by men.

Once these social patterns come into view, new questions emerge. Why are some groups more likely to experience unemployment than others? Why do entire industries shrink or expand? Why do some communities recover quickly while others struggle for years? These questions point us toward the larger social dynamics that shape employment opportunities. For example, high-tech changes such as automation and artificial intelligence can eliminate or create entire categories of jobs. Institutions like schools and governments influence who has access to training, credentials, and job networks. Public policies related to unemployment benefits, minimum wage laws, and student loan rules shape the conditions for employment. These forces run on a scale far beyond any one person, yet they structure the opportunities available to everyone.

The sociological eye links individual factors to the social factors behind unemployment and other social phenomena. Using the sociological eye does not deny that individual circumstances matter. Instead, individual explanations are incomplete. By learning to see social patterns, question individual explanations, and consider the role of social factors, you begin to understand both the experience of an unemployed individual and unemployment as a social phenomenon. You begin to see how social structure affects our lives.

Social Structure

Social structure is another key concept that can help support our understanding of the social world, including unemployment. You can think of social

structure as the way social life is ordered, making our lives predictable (Krieg 2026). As a student, it may be challenging to think about because social structure is highly abstract and invisible. You cannot touch it or hold it, but it is there. It is most noticeable when it is not meeting social needs as expected. Importantly, it is stable, meaning that it changes slowly.

The components of a social structure (social institutions, roles, statuses) keep society functioning. A social structure can be thought of like a sports team (Dobriner 1969). Statuses and roles connected with being a player, coach, referee, or fan make the game predictable. Statuses are a person's rank within the social hierarchy and roles are the behaviors linked with a specific status (Biddle, 1986; Linton, 1936). Roles have defined expectations (or norms). For example, in soccer, the only player allowed to use their hands to touch the ball within the playing field boundaries is the goalie, and even then, only inside the penalty area. Knowing the rules means that the team then creates a role for the goalie—a last line of defense against the opposing team. Team members know how they can and cannot act, as their roles in defense and offense relate to others' roles on the field. Only in rare cases would you see another player trying to block a shot in the penalty area.

In addition to roles and statuses, social institutions are a major component of social structure. Social institutions are ongoing patterns for meeting major social needs. One social institution with a great deal of power over our everyday lives is the economy. For example, different regions have economies driven by specialized industries, which have changed over time. Globally, service-based industries (healthcare, food services) have grown. In 2025, 51 percent of employed people in the world work in service industries compared to only 35 percent in 1991 (World Bank Group 2026b). Service-based industries provide employment for at least half of employed people in about 130 countries (World Bank Group 2026b). Due to innovations in farming, fewer people work in agriculture (43 percent in 1991 compared to 26 percent in 2025) (World Bank Group 2026a). In contrast to service industries, there are only 24 countries where at least half of employed people work

in agriculture (mostly in Africa) (World Bank Group 2026a). In the United States, two percent of employed people work in agriculture and 80 percent are employed in service industries (World Bank Group 2026a, World Bank Group 2026b). Thus, our odds of working in a service-based or agriculture-based industry are dependent on where we live. Practically speaking, the type of industrial development of a nation also influences what kinds of skills or credentials (like a college degree) might be necessary for employment.

Socialization

Socialization is a key idea for learning and understanding norms (or expectations of behavior and attitudes) surrounding work, including roles associated with employment and unemployment. **Socialization** describes the processes of how we learn, negotiate, and reproduce norms, roles, values, and culture (Kordsmeier 2026).

Employment is a major part of social life. In the United States, the question “what do you do?” typically means “what do you do for work?” It is a common question U.S. people ask to get to know someone new. Moreover, for U.S. adults, our sense of identity is often tied to our occupation. The importance of work to our identity and even national identity can be seen by the focus in the U.S. school system on socializing students into a clearly defined career. If adults are unemployed, then, governments and others can look to schools for failing to socialize children into careers rather than addressing government and economic policies that contribute to unemployment like automation and artificial intelligence.

Because of the growing belief that unemployment is linked with a lack of training for a specific career, many U.S. students are choosing STEM-based career pathways, such as nursing or engineering. Nursing has an extremely low unemployment rate (2.1 percent) (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2026). However, unemployment rates vary widely for engineering graduates and depend on their specialty: from a low of 1.7 percent for engineering technology graduates to a high of 7.8 percent for computer engineers (as a result of the growth of artificial

intelligence) (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2026). Overall, education majors tend to have the lowest unemployment rates, while arts-based majors tend to have the highest. However, college graduates have lower unemployment rates than non-college graduates (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2026).

Beliefs about how unemployment is related to college major shapes educational and career trajectories even when the beliefs are incorrect. We take on these beliefs through socialization from our parents, teachers, counselors, media, and institutional messaging. The messaging around college majors and careers becomes taken-for-granted “common sense” about which careers are safe, risky, respectable, or irresponsible. Therefore, beliefs about unemployment function as social facts: even when inaccurate or exaggerated, they guide behavior and contribute to patterned outcomes. The Thomas Theorem captures this relationship between belief and consequence.

According to the Thomas Theorem, “If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928:571-2). The Thomas Theorem helps explain how socially shared beliefs, whether accurate or not, shape individual choices and collective outcomes through socialization. When some college majors, like arts-based or non-STEM fields, are believed to increase the chance of unemployment, students may avoid them regardless of their interests or abilities. On the other hand, majors framed as “safe” or “practical,” such as nursing or engineering, become attractive because of actual labor market conditions *and* because we are socialized into viewing them as responsible choices. Through socialization, students internalize these definitions and act accordingly. They choose college majors believed to be the best pathway to a job regardless of what degrees or skills employers value. For instance, U.S. employers rank critical thinking as one of the top skills they want in their employees—a skill developed by studying a range of fields, including sociology (National Association of Colleges and Employers 2025). In this way, beliefs about employment do not merely describe the world; they help create it.

Stratification

Unemployment rates are also linked to stratification, which sociologists also study. **Stratification** is a type of inequality that is not random but patterned: it is deeply rooted in social structures, long-lasting, and, because of these patterns, often perceived as legitimate (Sola and Rendueles 2026). If the sociological eye teaches us to see patterns beyond individual cases, the study of stratification asks where patterns of inequality come from and why they persist for groups along the lines of race, class, gender, and more.

A useful sociological starting point for understanding contemporary stratification is history. Unemployment seems inevitable, but it is a recent phenomenon and a feature of capitalist economic systems. In the Middle Ages, people could starve, but they were not “unemployed.” In contrast, capitalist economies revolve around the market: most of us sell our labor in exchange for a wage that pays for the goods and services we then buy on that same market. Put simply, unemployment arises when the supply of labor exceeds demand for it. Even the term unemployment appeared only at the end of the 19th century with the emergence of a wage-based economy.

One major source of stratification lies in class divisions within the labor market. Class divisions exist between employers, who buy labor, and workers, who sell it, and among workers themselves according to skills, education, or other traits. The Marxist tradition emphasizes capitalist *exploitation* as the driving force behind inequality. In contrast, the Weberian tradition focuses on *opportunity hoarding*, through which some groups restrict access to opportunities needed to get jobs. These opportunities include controlling access to credentials (like a college degree), networks (getting a job through a family friend), and so on. Unemployment is itself a major source of inequality because it deprives people of income. Income is needed for survival in capitalist economies. A point captured by Joan Robinson’s ([1962] 2015:38) famous remark, “the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all.”

The sociological analysis of inequality and unemployment must focus on the structural features of capitalism across time and place. Why are inequality and unemployment higher in some countries than in others? What policies can ease them? Sociologists pay close attention to power relations and social institutions: from the role of social capital (who you know) in helping people find work, to the strength of organized labor (unions) that made higher wages and better benefits possible after World War II.

If we turn our sociological eye to unemployment, it is not just how much there is and who it affects, but also how people interpret and morally judge it. In *Flawed System/Flawed Self*, Sharone (2013) interviewed unemployed white-collar workers in the United States and Israel to compare their experiences. He finds that Israelis tend to blame the labor market system more often than the individual worker. In contrast, U.S. white-collar workers experience unemployment as a personal failure more than a market failure. These divergent explanations for unemployment connect to a broader issue: for a society that believes success or failure comes only based on individual effort, that belief conceals the social processes that generate and reproduce inequality beyond individual effort, including unemployment, legitimizing these unequal outcomes.

Social Reproduction and Social Change

Social reproduction and social change are two sides of the same coin. **Social reproduction** refers to how social structures and norms persist with minimal change over time (Rubin 2026). Socialization is the process where a group passes on its norms to the next generation, ensuring social reproduction occurs. Therefore, social structure remains fairly stable. The sum of this is that social structure tends to look the same day to day, year to year. For example, the best predictor of whether someone goes to college is whether their parents went to college. How was your choice of college major based on what your parents said about it?

The concept of **social change** focuses on how norms, social structures, and the relationships that make up society can change over time. Social change can occur slowly, one shifting norm at a time leading to broader social change. Or social change

may be more rapid and come from things like technological innovation, political revolutions, or environmental influence. Constant or unpredictable change can lead to instability for a society. A sociological eye uncovers/reveals the social processes that lead to social reproduction and social change.

Consider social change around the status of young people and employment. Young U.S. adults are expected to find employment and provide for their economic needs. However, many jobs with high enough wages to meet one's needs often require credentials beyond a high school degree. This lengthens the period where families support their children. The recognition of new age group categories, like emerging adults (late teens to mid-20s), reflects this change. Moreover, U.S. federal policies related to college financial aid and health insurance expect parents to provide at least some economic support to their young adult children. The expectations that parents provide economically for their children remains the same, but the length of time for this expectation has increased.

The pressure on families to provide for young adults could grow depending on how disruptive generative AI tools are to the job market. Young adults are particularly vulnerable because experts predict that entry-level white-collar jobs are most at risk of being work that AI tools can do (Scheiber 2025). Therefore, we should expect some social change due to AI tools replacing entry-level (and young) workers. Other social institutions, like government, may or may not step in with more economic support to soften the blow to this employability of young people. Those people most likely to succeed in this new job market are either those with the greatest skills using AI tools, those who own these tools, and those who have support from their families and governments to weather these shifts in employment options.

Sociological Skills

Sociology provides a lens for explaining the social world and offers a set of skills to help us evaluate such understandings. It allows us to move beyond common sense beliefs about things like unemployment. Instead, a sociological eye views social

phenomena as complex and shaped by structure, stratification, socialization, and social change and social reproduction. The six sociological skills allow us to analyze why unemployment occurs, who is harmed or benefits from it, and which solutions are most effective.

Apply Sociological Theories to Real-World Issues

Theory “offers testable explanations of social phenomena” (Medley-Rath 2025). Sociologists test theory by systematically collecting and analyzing data to determine if there is support for the theory. Theory, then, provides a framework for understanding how society works. Sociological theories draw attention to how unemployment is often not an individual failing. Instead, unemployment is related to structural factors such as technological innovations that replace jobs, lack of preparation for newly emerging careers by educational institutions, discrimination, and so on. Unemployment is related to multiple factors, which means there are multiple explanations for it. Sociology highlights how economic systems, and stratification shape who becomes unemployed and how they experience it.

Critically Evaluate Explanations of Social Behavior

Explaining unemployment by focusing on an individual’s effort or choices is tempting. However, sociology asks us to evaluate individual-level explanations alongside structural explanations. Effort and choice might explain one person’s unemployment, but they do not explain the unemployment of groups. Structural factors shape unemployment rates as described in this article. Being able to critically evaluate explanations of social phenomena can help you understand how social forces influence social problems like unemployment.

Use Scientific Methods to Study Society

A sociology background equips you with research design tools to answer questions about social life. In sociology, you will learn how to gather data scientifically to understand the social world that moves beyond your individual

perspective. Sociology coursework helps you learn how to design surveys, locate and understand existing research, and observe patterns about many topics. You can use these skills to investigate how unemployment or another social problem affects distinct groups. Using a scientific approach to study society allows us to use evidence to support our claims and draw conclusions about social problems. This evidence should shape evidence-based solutions, too.

Evaluate the Strengths and Limitations of Research Methods and Data

Sociologists use a range of methodological approaches and data sources. For instance, national governments collect unemployment data, which sociologists can then analyze. In the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics typically reports employment data every month (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2026). The World Bank Group (2026c) shares unemployment data for most countries and economies worldwide. Therefore, sociologists can use these data sources to evaluate national unemployment rates.

Sociologists are also interested in the experience of unemployment. They may survey or interview unemployed or formerly unemployed people to understand how unemployment affects their daily lives and sense of identity. Using different approaches (surveys or interviews) provides a more complete picture of unemployment. However, each approach also has limitations related to how researchers collect samples, what people are willing to share, and whether researchers can generalize the results beyond the people in the study.

Analyze Social Science Data

Unemployment is experienced unevenly. For example, U.S. unemployment rates are lower for college graduates (3 percent) compared to people without a college degree (4.2 percent). However, age is also correlated with unemployment. Young college graduates (aged 22-27) have a higher unemployment rate (5.3 percent) than the overall unemployment rate for college graduates. But the good news is that

college graduates still have lower rates of unemployment compared to other 22-27-year-olds (7.8 percent) (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2026).

The larger point is that the overall national unemployment rate does not tell the full story. It does not show how unemployment varies by age, race, gender, region, or credentials. As a sociology student, however, you will develop skills to ask questions about how unemployment varies across these and other demographic characteristics, and *why* these differences exist.

Apply Sociological Knowledge to Shape Policy and Public Discourse

Sociological knowledge provides a clearer and more complete picture of social phenomena like unemployment. By understanding unemployment sociologically, you are better able to evaluate policies to address it. These policies might involve job training programs, minimum wage laws, unemployment benefits, and the challenges and opportunities posed by new technologies like artificial intelligence on unemployment. You will be empowered to join in public debates and evaluate proposed solutions that address the structural causes of unemployment. Remember, structural problems require structural, not individual, solutions.

Conclusion

Sociology trains us to think critically, use evidence, interpret data carefully, and recognize the strengths and limitations of research. Its concepts and skills can prepare you for careers in law, government, business, social services, and beyond. A background in sociology supports your ability to develop and assess policy about unemployment overall or work directly with people experiencing it.

Sociology is not meant to describe an individual's situation, but rather to situate one's individual experiences within the broader society. Understanding key sociological concepts and developing sociological skills means being able to better understand your position in society and how the broader social structure influences your position. The terms and skills offered in the Sociological Literacy Framework

are your key to unlocking important insights into how the world works. By helping you understand the context of larger social forces, sociology can illuminate possibilities to improve your own life as well as meaningful social change to improve social life and society.

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