

THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Sociology offers a perspective, a view of the world. The *sociological perspective* (or imagination) opens a window onto unfamiliar worlds—and offers a fresh look at familiar worlds. The sociological perspective enables you to gain a new perception of social life. In fact, this is what many find appealing about sociology.

Seeing the Broader Social Context

The **sociological perspective** stresses the social contexts in which people live. It examines how these contexts influence people's lives. At the center of the sociological perspective is the question of how groups influence people, especially how people are influenced by their **society**—a group of people who share a culture and a territory. To find out why people do what they do, sociologists look at **social location**, the corners in life that people occupy because of where they are located in a society. Sociologists look at how jobs, income, education, gender, age, and race–ethnicity affect people's ideas and behavior.

Consider, for example, how being identified with a group called *females* or with a group called *males* when we are growing up shapes our ideas of who we are and what we should attain in life. Growing up as a female or a male influences not only our aspirations but also how we feel about ourselves. It also affects the way we relate to others in dating and marriage and at work. Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) put it this way: “The sociological imagination [perspective] enables us to grasp the connection between history and biography.” By *history*, Mills meant that each society is located in a broad stream of events. Because of this, each society has specific characteristics—such as its ideas about the proper roles of men and women. In short, people don't do what they do because of inherited internal mechanisms, such as instincts. Rather, *external* influences—our experiences—become part of our thinking and motivations. In short, the society in which we grow up, and our particular location in that society, lie at the center of what we do and how we think. Examining the broad social context in which people live is essential to the *sociological perspective*, for this context shapes our beliefs and attitudes and sets guidelines for what we do.

ORIGINS OF SOCIOLOGY

Just how did sociology begin? In some ways, it is difficult to answer this question. Even ancient peoples tried to figure out how social life works. They, too, asked questions about why war exists, why some people become more powerful than others, and why some are rich but others are poor. However, they often based their answers on superstition, myth, or even the positions of the stars, and they did not *test* their assumptions.

Science, in contrast, requires theories that can be tested by research. Measured by this standard, sociology emerged about the middle of the 1800s, when social observers began to use scientific methods to test their ideas. Sociology grew out of social upheaval. The Industrial Revolution had just begun. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Europe's economy was changing from agriculture to factory production. Masses of people were moving to cities in search of work. Their ties to the land were broken, distancing them from a culture that had provided ready answers to the difficult questions of life. The city greeted them with horrible working conditions: miserable pay; long hours; dangerous, exhausting work.

For families to survive, even children had to work in these conditions; some children were even chained to factory machines to make certain they would not run away. With their world turned upside down, people could no longer count on tradition to provide the answers to questions about social life. About this same time, **the scientific method**—using objective, systematic observations to test theories—was being tried out in chemistry and physics. This revealed many secrets that had been concealed in nature. With traditional answers failing, the logical step was to apply the scientific method to questions about social life. The result was the birth of sociology.

Auguste Comte and Positivism

This idea of applying the scientific method to the social world, known as **positivism**, apparently was first proposed by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). With the social upheaval of the French Revolution still fresh in his mind, Comte left the small town in which he had grown up and moved to Paris. The changes he

experienced in this move, combined with those France underwent in the revolution, led Comte to become interested in what holds society together. What creates social order, he wondered, instead of anarchy or chaos? And then, once society does become set on a particular course, what causes it to change?

As Comte considered these questions, he concluded that the right way to answer them was to apply the scientific method to social life. Just as this method had revealed the law of gravity, so, too, it would uncover the laws that underlie society. Comte called this new science **sociology**—“the study of society” (from the Greek *logos*, “study of,” and the Latin *socius*, “companion,” or “being with others”). Comte stressed that this new science not only would discover social principles but also would apply them to social reform. Sociologists would reform the entire society, making it a better place to live.

Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who grew up in England, is sometimes called the second founder of sociology. Spencer disagreed profoundly with Comte that sociology should guide social reform. Spencer thought that societies evolve from lower (“barbarian”) to higher (“civilized”) forms. As generations pass, the most capable and intelligent (“the fittest”) members of a society survive, while the less capable die out. Thus, over time, societies improve. To help the lower classes is to interfere with this natural process. The fittest members will produce a more advanced society—unless misguided do-gooders get in the way and help the less fit survive. Spencer called this principle “**the survival of the fittest.**” Although Spencer coined this phrase, it usually is attributed to his contemporary, Charles Darwin, who proposed that organisms evolve over time as they adapt to their environment. Because they are so similar to Darwin’s ideas about the evolution of organisms, Spencer’s views of the evolution of societies became known as *social Darwinism*. Spencer did not conduct scientific studies. Like Comte, he simply developed ideas about society.

Karl Marx and Class Conflict

Karl Marx (1818–1883) not only influenced sociology but also left his mark on world history. Marx’s influence has been so great that even the *Wall Street Journal*, that staunch advocate of capitalism, has called him one of the three greatest modern thinkers (the other two being Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein).

Marx, who came to England after being exiled from his native Germany for proposing revolution, believed that the engine of human history is **class conflict**. He said that the *bourgeoisie* (boo-shwa-ZEE) (the *capitalists*, those who own the means to produce wealth—capital, land, factories, and machines) are locked in conflict with the *proletariat* (the exploited workers, who do not own the means of production). This bitter struggle can end only when members of the working class unite and violently break their chains of bondage. This revolution will usher in a classless society, one free of exploitation. People will work according to their abilities and receive goods and services according to their needs (Marx and Engels 1848/1967). Marxism is not the same as communism. Although Marx proposed revolution as the only way that the workers could gain control of society, he did not develop the political system called *communism*. This is a later application of his ideas. Indeed, Marx himself felt disgusted when he heard debates about his insights into social life. After listening to some of the positions attributed to him, he shook his head and said, “I am not a Marxist” (Dobriner 1969b:222; Gitlin 1997:89).

Emile Durkheim and Social Integration

The primary professional goal of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was to get sociology recognized as a separate academic discipline (Coser 1977). Up to this time, sociology had been viewed as part of history and economics.

Durkheim, who grew up in eastern France and was educated in both Germany and France, achieved his goal in 1887. That year, at the University of Bordeaux, he became the world’s first professor of sociology. Durkheim also had another goal: to show how social forces affect people’s behavior. To accomplish this, he conducted rigorous research. Comparing the suicide rates of several European countries, Durkheim (1897/1966) found that each country has a different suicide rate—and that these rates remain about the

same year after year. He also found that different groups within a country have different suicide rates and that these, too, remain stable from year to year. His data showed that Protestants, males, and the unmarried kill themselves at a higher rate than do Catholics or Jews, females, and the married. From these observations, Durkheim concluded that suicide is not what it appears— simply a matter of individuals here and there deciding to take their lives for personal reasons. Instead, *social factors underlie suicide*, which is why a group's rate remains fairly constant year after year.

But what are those social factors? Durkheim concluded that the main one is **social integration**, the degree to which people are tied to their social group. If people have weaker social ties, they are more likely to commit suicide. How does this apply to Protestants, males, and the unmarried, those who have the higher rates? Protestantism, said Durkheim, encourages greater freedom of thought and action; males are more independent than females; and the unmarried lack the ties and responsibilities that come with marriage. In other words, members of these groups have fewer of the social bonds that keep people from committing suicide. In Durkheim's terms, they have less social integration.

Despite the many years that have passed since Durkheim did his research, the principle he uncovered still applies: People who are less socially integrated have higher rates of suicide. Even today, those same groups that Durkheim identified—Protestants, males, and the unmarried— are more likely to kill themselves.

Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic

Max Weber (Mahx VAY-ber) (1864–1920), a German sociologist and a contemporary of Durkheim's, also became a professor in the new academic discipline of sociology. Like Durkheim and Marx, Weber is one of the most influential of all sociologists, and you will come across his writings and theories in later chapters. Let's consider an issue Weber raised that remains controversial today.

Religion and the Origin of Capitalism: Weber disagreed with Marx's claim that economics is the central force in social change. That role, he said, belongs to religion. He came to this conclusion when he (1904/1958) contrasted the Roman Catholic and Protestant belief systems. Roman Catholics, he said, were taught that because they were members of the only true church, they were on the road to heaven. This made them comfortable with traditional ways of life. The Protestant belief system, in contrast, undermined the spiritual security of its followers, motivating them to embrace change. Protestants of the Calvinist tradition were told that they wouldn't know if they were saved until Judgment Day. Acutely uncomfortable with this uncertainty, they began to look for "signs" that they were in God's favor.

Concluding that financial success was a divine blessing and that God did not want them to waste this blessing, they began to live frugal lives. Saving their money, they began to invest it to make even more. This fundamental change in the way money was viewed, said Weber, produced the capital that brought about the birth of capitalism. Weber called this self-denying approach to life the *Protestant ethic*. He termed the readiness to invest capital in order to make more money the *spirit of capitalism*. To test his theory, Weber compared the extent of capitalism in Roman Catholic and Protestant countries. In line with his theory, he found that capitalism was more likely to flourish in Protestant countries. Weber's conclusion that religion was the key factor in the rise of capitalism was controversial when he made it, and it continues to be debated today (Wade 2007).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY

Facts never interpret themselves. To make sense out of life, we use our common sense. That is, to understand our experiences (our "facts"), we place them into a framework of more-or-less related ideas. Sociologists do this, too, but they place their observations into a conceptual framework called a theory. A **theory** is a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work. It is an explanation of how two or more "facts" are related to one another.

Sociologists use three major theories: symbolic interactionism, functional analysis, and conflict theory.

Symbolic Interactionism

We can trace the origins of **symbolic interactionism** to the Scottish moral philosophers of the eighteenth century, who noted that individuals evaluate their own conduct by comparing themselves with others (Stryker 1990). This perspective was brought to sociology by Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929), William I. Thomas (1863–1947), and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931).

Symbols in Everyday Life: Symbolic interactionists study how people use *symbols*—the things to which we attach meaning—to develop their views of the world and to communicate with one another. Without symbols, our social life would be no more sophisticated than that of animals. For example, without symbols we would have no aunts or uncles, employers or teachers—or even brothers and sisters. I know that this sounds strange, but it is symbols that define our relationships. There would still be reproduction, of course, but no symbols to tell us how we are related to whom. We would not know to whom we owe respect and obligations, or from whom we can expect privileges—the essence of human relationships.

Symbols allow not only relationships to exist, but also society. Without symbols, we could not coordinate our actions with those of others. We could not make plans for a future day, time, and place. Unable to specify times, materials, sizes, or goals, we could not build bridges and highways. Without symbols, there would be no movies or musical instruments. We would have no hospitals, no government, no religion. The class you are taking could not exist—nor could this book. On the positive side, there would be no war.

In short, symbolic interactionists analyze how our behaviors depend on the ways we define ourselves and others. They study face-to-face interaction, examining how people make sense out of life and their place in it. Symbolic interactionists point out that even the *self* is a symbol, for it consists of the ideas we have about who we are. And the self is a changing symbol: As we interact with others, we adjust our views of who we are based on how we interpret the reactions of others to us. We'll get more into this later.

Functional Analysis

The central idea of **functional analysis** is that society is a whole unit, made up of interrelated parts that work together. Functional analysis, also known as *functionalism* and *structural functionalism*, is rooted in the origins of sociology. Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer viewed society as a kind of living organism. Just as a person or animal has organs that function together, they wrote, so does society. And like an organism, if society is to function smoothly, its parts must work together in harmony.

Emile Durkheim also viewed society as being composed of many parts, each with its own function. When all the parts of society fulfill their functions, society is in a “normal” state. If they do not fulfill their functions, society is in an “abnormal” or “pathological” state. To understand society, then, functionalists say that we need to look at both *structure* (how the parts of a society fit together to make the whole) and *function* (what each part does, how it contributes to society).

Robert Merton and Functionalism: Robert Merton (1910–2003) dismissed the organic analogy, but he did maintain the essence of functionalism—the image of society as a whole composed of parts that work together. Merton used the term *functions* to refer to the beneficial consequences of people's actions: Functions help keep a group (society, social system) in balance. In contrast, *dysfunctions* are consequences that harm a society: They undermine a system's equilibrium. Functions can be either manifest or latent. If an action is *intended* to help some part of a system, it is a *manifest function*. For example, suppose that government officials become concerned about our low rate of childbirth. Congress offers a \$10,000 bonus for every child born to a married couple. The intention, or manifest function, of the bonus is to increase childbearing within the family unit. Merton pointed out that people's actions can also have *latent functions*; that is, they can have *unintended* consequences that help a system adjust. Let's suppose that the bonus works. As the birth rate jumps, so does the sale of diapers and baby furniture. Because the benefits to these businesses were not the intended consequences, they are latent functions of the bonus.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory provides a third perspective on social life. Unlike the functionalists, who view society as a harmonious whole, with its parts working together, conflict theorists stress that society is composed of groups that are competing with one another for scarce resources. Although the surface may show alliances or cooperation, scratch that surface and you will find a struggle for power.

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory: Karl Marx, the founder of conflict theory, witnessed the Industrial Revolution that transformed Europe. He saw that peasants who had left the land to seek work in cities had to work for wages that barely provided enough to eat. Things were so bad that the average worker died at age 30, the average wealthy person at age 50 (Edgerton 1992:87). Shocked by this suffering and exploitation, Marx began to analyze society and history. As he did so, he developed **conflict theory**. He concluded that the key to human history is *class conflict*.

In each society, some small group controls the means of production and exploits those who are not in control. In industrialized societies, the struggle is between the *bourgeoisie*, the small group of capitalists who own the means to produce wealth, and the *proletariat*, the mass of workers who are exploited by the bourgeoisie. The capitalists also control the legal and political system: If the workers rebel, the capitalists call on the power of the state to subdue them. When Marx made his observations, capitalism was in its infancy, and workers were at the mercy of their employers. Workers had none of what we take for granted today—minimum wages, eight-hour days, coffee breaks, five-day workweeks, paid vacations and holidays, medical benefits, sick leave, unemployment compensation, Social Security, and, for union workers, the right to strike. Marx's analysis reminds us that these benefits came not from generous hearts, but by workers forcing concessions from their employers.

Conflict Theory Today: Many sociologists extend conflict theory beyond the relationship of capitalists and workers. They examine how opposing interests saturate every layer of society—whether that be a small group, an organization, a community, or the entire society. For example, when police, teachers, and parents try to enforce conformity, which they must do, this creates resentment and resistance. It is the same when a teenager tries to “change the rules” to gain more independence. There is, then, a constant struggle throughout society to determine who has authority or influence and how far that dominance goes.

Sociologist Lewis Coser (1913–2003) pointed out that conflict is most likely to develop among people who are in close relationships. These people have worked out ways to distribute power and privilege, responsibilities and rewards. Any change in this arrangement can lead to hurt feelings, resentment, and conflict. Even in intimate relationships, then, people are in a constant balancing act, with conflict lying uneasily just beneath the surface.

Feminists and Conflict Theory: Just as Marx examined conflict between capitalists and workers, many feminists analyze conflict between men and women. A primary focus is the historical, contemporary, and global inequalities of men and women—and how the traditional dominance by men can be overcome to bring about equality of the sexes. Feminists are not united by the conflict perspective, however. They tackle a variety of topics and use whatever theory applies.

The perspectives differ in their level of analysis. Functionalists and conflict theorists provide macro-level analysis because they examine the large-scale patterns of society. Symbolic interactionists carry out micro-level analysis because they focus on the small-scale patterns of social life.

Perspective	Usual Level of Analysis	Focus of Analysis	Key Terms	Applying the Perspective to the U.S. Divorce Rate
Symbolic Interactionism	Microsociological: examines small-scale patterns of social interaction	Face-to-face interaction, how people use symbols to create social life	Symbols Interaction Meanings Definitions	Industrialization and urbanization changed marital roles and led to a redefinition of love, marriage, children, and divorce.
Functional Analysis (also called functionalism and structural functionalism)	Macrosociological: examines large-scale patterns of society	Relationships among the parts of society; how these parts are functional (have beneficial consequences) or dysfunctional (have negative consequences)	Structure Functions (manifest and latent) Dysfunctions Equilibrium	As social change erodes the traditional functions of the family, family ties weaken, and the divorce rate increases.
Conflict Theory	Macrosociological: examines large-scale patterns of society	The struggle for scarce resources by groups in a society; how the elites use their power to control the weaker groups	Inequality Power Conflict Competition Exploitation	When men control economic life, the divorce rate is low because women find few alternatives to a bad marriage. The high divorce rate reflects a shift in the balance of power between men and women.

DOING SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

People make common sense assumptions about the way the world is. To truly understand social life, sociologists choose to move beyond “common sense” and do research.

Scientific research follows eight basic steps.

1. **Select a topic:** The first step is to select a topic to research.
2. **Define the problem:** The second step is to define the problem by narrowing the topic.
3. **Review Literature:** The third step is to review literature to find out what has been published on the problem.
4. **Formulate the hypothesis:** The fourth step is formulating a hypothesis—a statement of what you expect to find according to predictions that are based on a theory. A hypothesis predicts a relationship between or among variables—factors that vary, from one person or situation to another. The hypothesis will need operational definitions, precise ways to measure the variables.
5. **Choose a research method:** The fifth step is choosing one of six research methods or designs to gather data.
6. **Collect the data:** The sixth step is collecting data. One must take care to assure validity—that your operational definitions measure what they are intended to measure—as well as reliability—meaning that if other researchers use your operational definitions, their findings will be consistent with yours.
7. **Analyze results:** The seventh step is to analyze the results. If a hypothesis has been part of your research, then you will test it during this step.
8. **Share the results:** The last step is sharing the results through a written report, which will allow you to present your findings with the scientific community.

Research Methods

A. There are seven research methods, or designs, that sociologists use. The method chosen depends upon the questions the researcher wants to answer.

1. **Surveys** can be used to ask individuals a series of questions. Often, a narrowed target population called a *sample* is chosen when using surveys. Random and stratified random samples are both utilized when gathering sample populations to survey. Questions developed for surveys must be neutral and allow respondents, people who answer your questions, to express their own opinions. They can also take the form of closed- and open-ended questions. When asking questions, established rapport—a feeling of trust, with respondents will allow them to feel comfortable sharing personal, sensitive matters.

2. In **participant observation**, or fieldwork, the researcher participates in a research setting while observing what is happening in that setting.
3. **Case studies** require researchers to focus on a single event, situation, or individual. The purpose is to understand the dynamics of relationships and power, or even the thinking that motivates people.
4. In **secondary analysis**, researchers analyze data that others have collected.
5. **Documents**, or written sources, include books, newspapers, bank records, and immigration records.
6. **Experiments** are useful for determining cause and effect.
7. Some researchers use **unobtrusive measures**, observing the behavior of people who are not aware that they are being studied.

Ethics and Values in Sociological Research

Research ethics require honesty, truth, and openness (sharing findings with the scientific community.)

Ethics forbid the falsification of results and condemn plagiarism.

1. Sociologists also take measures to protect their respondents. For example, Mario Brajuha, who refused to share field notes that he had gathered while working at a restaurant that later burned down. He is applauded for protecting his respondents and their confidential information.
2. Another ethical problem involves what you tell participants about your research. Although it is considered acceptable for sociologists to do covert participant observation (studying some situation without announcing that they are doing research), to deliberately misrepresent oneself is considered unethical.
3. Values—beliefs about what is good or desirable in life and the way the world ought to be—are another controversial issue in sociology.
 - (a) Weber advocated that sociological research should be value free (personal values or biases should not influence social research) and objective (totally neutral).
 - (b) Sociologists agree that objectivity is a proper goal, but they acknowledge that no one can escape values entirely.
 - (c) *Replication* occurs when a study is repeated to see if the same results are found. It is one means to avoid the distortions that values can cause.
 - (d) Although sociologists may agree that research should be objective, the proper purposes and uses of sociology are argued among sociologists, with some taking the position that the proper role of sociology is to advance understanding of social life, while others believe that it is the responsibility of sociologists to explore harmful social arrangements of society.