

The Study of Society



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What Is Sociology?

Each of us starts the study of society with the study of individuals. We wonder why Theresa keeps getting involved with men who treat her badly, why Mike never learns to quit drinking before he gets sick, why our aunt puts up with our uncle, and why anybody likes the Spice Girls. We wonder why people we've known for years seem to change drastically when they get married or change jobs.

If Theresa were the only person who ever got into this predicament and if Mike were the only person who ever drank too much, then we might try to understand their behavior by peering into their personalities. We know, however, that there are thousands, maybe millions, of men and women who have disappointing romances and who drink too much. To understand Mike and Theresa, then, we must place them in a larger context and examine the forces that seem to compel so many people to behave in a similar way.

Sociologists tend to view these common human situations as if they were plays. They might, for example, title a common human drama *Boy Meets Girl*. Just as *Hamlet* has been performed all around the world for 400 years with different actors and different interpretations, *Boy Meets Girl* has also been performed countless times. Of course, the drama is acted out a little bit differently each time, depending on the scenery, the people in the lead roles, and the century—but the essentials are the same. Thus we can read nineteenth- or even sixteenth-century love stories and understand why those people did what they did. They were playing roles in a play that is still performed daily.

More formal definitions will be introduced later, but the metaphor of the theater can be used now to introduce two of the most basic concepts in sociology: role and social structure. By *role* we mean the expected performance of someone who occupies a specific position. Mothers have roles, teachers have roles, students have roles, and lovers have roles. Each position has an established script that suggests appropriate lines, gestures, and relationships with others. Discovering what each society offers as a stock set of roles is one of the major themes in sociology. Sociologists try to find the common roles that appear in society and to determine why some people play one role rather than another.

The other major sociological concept is *social structure*, which is concerned with the larger structure of the play in which the roles appear. What is the whole set of roles that appears in this play, and how are the roles interrelated? Thus the role of mother is understood in the context of the social structure we call the family. The role of student is understood in the context of the social structure we call education. Through these two major ideas, role and social structure, sociologists try to understand the human drama.

The **sociological imagination** is the ability to see the intimate realities of our own lives in the context of common social structures; it is the ability to see personal troubles as public issues.

The Sociological Imagination

The ability to see the intimate realities of our own lives in the context of common social structures has been called the **sociological imagination** (Mills 1959, 15). Sociologist C. Wright Mills suggests that the sociological imagination is developed when we can place such personal troubles as poverty, divorce, or loss of faith into a

larger social context, when we can see them as common public issues. He suggests that many of the things we experience as individuals are really beyond our control. They have to do with society as a whole, its historical development, and the way it is organized. Mills gives us some examples of the differences between a personal trouble and a public issue:

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals. . . .

Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear on them. (Mills 1959, 9)

In everyday life, we do not define personal experiences in these terms. We frequently do not consider the impact of history and social structures on our own experiences. If a child becomes a drug addict, parents tend to blame themselves; if spouses divorce, their friends usually focus on their personality problems; if you flunk out of school, everyone will be likely to blame you personally. To develop the sociological imagination is to understand how outcomes such as these are, in part, a product of society and not fully within the control of the individual.

Some people flunk out of school, for example, not because they are stupid or lazy but because they are confused about just which play they are appearing in. The “this is the best time of your life” play calls for very different roles from the “education is the key to success” play. Other people may flunk out because they come from a social class that does not give them the financial or psychological support that they need. These students may be working 25 hours a week in addition to going to school; they may be going to school despite their family’s indifference. In contrast, other students may find it difficult to fail: Their parents provide tuition, living expenses, a personal computer, a car, and moral support. As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 12, parents’ social class is one of the best predictors of who will fail and who will graduate. Success or failure is thus not entirely an individual matter; it is socially structured.

Sociological imagination, the ability to see our own lives and those of others as part of a larger social structure and a larger human drama, is central to sociology. Once we develop this imagination, we will be less likely to explain others’ behavior through their personality and will increasingly look to the roles and social structures that determine behavior. We will also recognize that the solutions to many social problems lie not in changing individuals but in changing the social structures and roles that are available to them. Although poverty, divorce, illegitimacy, and racism are experienced as intensely personal hardships, they are unlikely to be reduced effectively through massive personal therapy. To solve these and many other social problems, we need to change social structures; we need to rewrite the play. Sociological imagination offers a new way to look at—and a new way to search for solutions to—the common troubles and dilemmas that face individuals.



These homeless people are obviously experiencing dire personal problems: no food, no home, no shelter, no money, no medical care. Unfortunately, there are somewhere between 300,000 and 3 million others who share the same circumstances—for roughly the same reasons. Although some homeless individuals may suffer from mental illness or substance abuse, the extent of homelessness largely reflects the lack of affordable housing and adequately paying jobs in the contemporary United States. Learning to see personal experiences and tragedies as part of larger patterns of social problems is a vital element of the sociological imagination.

THINKING

CRITICALLY

Which of your own personal troubles might reasonably be reframed as a public issue? Does such a reframing change the nature of the solutions you can see?

Sociology as a Social Science

Sociology is concerned with people and with the rules of behavior that structure the ways in which people interact. As one of the social sciences, sociology has much in common with political science, economics, psychology, and anthropology. All these fields share an interest in human social behavior and, to some extent, an interest in society. In addition, they all share an emphasis on the scientific method as the best approach to knowledge. This means that they rely on critical and systematic examination of the evidence before reaching any conclusions and their practitioners approach each research question from a position of moral neutrality—that is, they try to be objective observers. This scientific approach is what distinguishes the social sciences from journalism and other fields that comment on the human condition.

Sociology is the systematic study of human social interaction.

Sociology is a social science whose unique province is the systematic study of human social interaction. Its emphasis is on relationships and patterns of interaction—how these patterns develop, how they are maintained, and also how they change.

The Emergence of Sociology

Sociology emerged as a field of inquiry during the political, economic, and intellectual upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rationalism and science replaced tradition as methods of understanding the world, leading to changes in government, education, economic production, and even religion and family life. The clearest symbol of this turmoil is the French Revolution (1789), with its bloody uprising and rejection of the past.

Although less dramatic, the industrial revolution had an even greater impact. Within a few generations, traditional rural societies were replaced by industrialized urban societies. The rapidity and scope of the change resulted in substantial social disorganization. It was as if society had changed the play without bothering to tell the actors, who were still trying to read from old scripts. Although a few people prospered mightily, millions struggled desperately to make the adjustment from rural peasantry to urban working class.

The picture of urban life during these years—in London, Chicago, or Hamburg—was one of disorganization, poverty, and dynamic and exciting change. This turmoil and tragedy provided the inspiration for much of the intellectual effort of the nineteenth century: Charles Dickens's novels, Jane Addams's reform work, Karl Marx's revolutionary theory. It also inspired the scientific study of society. These were the years in which science was a new enterprise and nothing seemed too much to hope for. After electricity, the telegraph, and the X-ray, who was to say that science could not discover how to turn stones into gold or how to eliminate poverty or war? Many hoped that the tools of science could help in understanding and controlling a rapidly changing society.



Auguste Comte, 1798–1857

The Founders: Comte, Martineau, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber

Auguste Comte (1798–1857)

The first major figure to be concerned with the science of society was the French philosopher Auguste Comte. He coined the term *sociology* in 1839 and is generally considered the founder of this field.

Comte was among the first to suggest that the scientific method could be applied to social events (Konig 1968). The philosophy of positivism, which he developed, suggests

that the social world can be studied with the same scientific accuracy and assurance as the natural world. Once the laws of social behavior were learned, he believed, scientists could accurately predict and control events. Although thoughtful people wonder whether we will ever be able to predict human behavior as accurately as we can predict the behavior of molecules, the scientific method remains central to sociology.

Another of Comte's lasting contributions was his recognition that an understanding of society requires a concern for both the sources of order and continuity and the sources of change. Comte called these divisions the theory of statics and the theory of dynamics. Although sociologists no longer use his terms, Comte's basic divisions of sociology continue under the labels of social structure (statics) and social process (dynamics).

Harriet Martineau (1802–1876)

Born into a wealthy English family, Harriet Martineau entered sociology at a time when few women were receiving any formal education. Initially, she helped to promote the development of the new discipline by translating Comte's work into English. A social activist and a sociologist in her own right, Martineau then used Comte's notions about the predictability and changeability of human society as a model for understanding and changing exploitative labor laws and the unfair treatment of women. Martineau traveled widely, writing about U.S. family customs, politics, religion, and race relations, while also serving as a forceful advocate for the abolition of slavery.



Harriet Martineau, 1802–1876

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)

Another pioneer in sociology was the British philosopher-scientist Herbert Spencer, who advanced the thesis that evolution accounts for the development of social, as well as natural, life. Spencer viewed society as similar to a giant organism: Just as the heart and lungs work together to sustain the life of the organism, so the parts of society work together to maintain society. Spencer's analogy led him to some conclusions that seem foolish by modern standards, but they also led him to some basic principles that still guide the study of sociology.

One of the Spencer's guiding principles was that society must be understood as an adaptation to its environment. This principle of adaptation implies that to understand society, we must focus on processes of growth and change. It also implies that there is no "right" way for a society to be organized. Instead, societies will change as circumstances change.

Spencer's second major contribution was his concern with the scientific method. More than many scholars of his day, Spencer was aware of the importance of objectivity and moral neutrality in investigation. In essays on the bias of class, the bias of patriotism, and the bias of theology, he warned sociologists that they must suspend their own opinions and wishes when studying the facts of society (Turner & Beegley 1981).

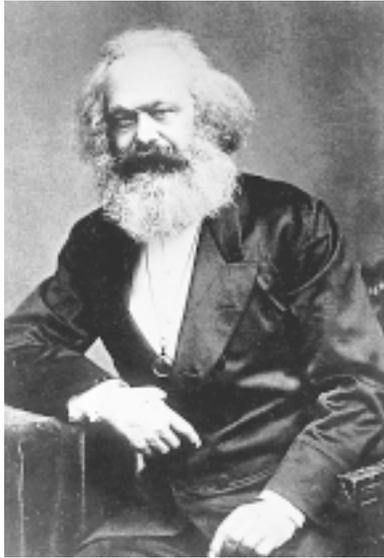


Herbert Spencer, 1820–1903

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

A philosopher, economist, and social activist, Karl Marx was born in Germany to middle-class Jewish parents. Marx received his doctorate in philosophy at the age of 23, but because of his radical views he was unable to obtain a university appointment and spent most of his adult life in exile and poverty (Rubel 1968).

Marx was repulsed by the poverty and inequality that characterized the nineteenth century. Unlike other scholars of his day, he was unwilling to see poverty as either a natural or a God-given condition of the human species. Instead, he viewed



Karl Marx, 1818–1883

Economic determinism means that economic relationships provide the foundation on which all other social and political arrangements are built.

Dialectic philosophy views change as a product of contradictions and conflict between the parts of society.



Emile Durkheim, 1858–1917

poverty and inequality as human-made conditions fostered by private property and capitalism. As a result, he devoted his intellectual efforts to understanding—and eliminating—capitalism. Many of Marx’s ideas are of more interest to political scientists and economists than to sociologists, but he left two enduring legacies to sociology: the theories of economic determinism and the dialectic.

ECONOMIC DETERMINISM. Marx began his analysis of society by assuming that the most basic task of any human society is to provide food and shelter to sustain itself. Marx argued that the ways in which society does this—its modes of production—provide the foundations on which all other social and political arrangements are built. Thus he believed that family, law, and religion all develop after and adapt to the economic structure; in short, they are determined by economic relationships. This idea is called **economic determinism**.

A good illustration of economic determinism is the influence of economic conditions on marriage choices. In traditional agricultural societies, young people often remain economically dependent upon their parents until well into adulthood because the only economic resource, land, is controlled by the older generation. In order to support themselves now and in the future, they must remain in their parents’ good graces; this means they cannot marry without their parents’ approval. In societies where young people can earn a living without their parents’ help, however, they can marry when they please and whomever they please. Marx would argue that this shift in mate selection practices is the result of changing economic relationships. Because Marx saw all human relations as stemming ultimately from the economic systems, he suggested that the major goal of a social scientist is to understand economic relationships: Who owns what, and how does this pattern of ownership affect human relationships?

THE DIALECTIC. Marx’s other major contribution was a theory of social change. Many nineteenth-century scholars applied Darwin’s theories of biological evolution to society; they believed that social change was the result of a natural process of adaptation. Marx, however, argued that the basis of change was conflict, not adaptation. He argued that conflicts between opposing economic interests lead to change.

Marx’s thinking on conflict was influenced by the German philosopher George Hegel, who suggested that for every idea (thesis), a counteridea (antithesis) develops to challenge it. As a result of conflict between the two ideas, a new idea (synthesis) is produced. This process of change is called the **dialectic** (see Figure 1.1).

Marx’s contribution was to apply this model of ideological change to change in economic and material systems. Within capitalism, Marx suggested, the capitalist class was the thesis and the working class was the antithesis. He predicted that conflicts between them would lead to a new synthesis, a new economic system that would be socialism. Indeed, in his role as social activist, Marx hoped to encourage conflict and ignite the revolution that would bring about the desired change. The workers, he declared, “have nothing to lose but their chains” (Marx & Engels [1848] 1965).

Although few sociologists are revolutionaries, many accept Marx’s ideas on the importance of economic relationships and economic conflicts. Much more controversial is Marx’s argument that the social scientist should also be a social activist, a person who not only tries to understand social relationships but also tries to change them.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

Like Marx, Durkheim was born into a middle-class family. While Marx was starving as an exile in England, however, Durkheim spent most of his career occupying a prestigious professorship at the Sorbonne. Far from rejecting society, Durkheim embraced

it, and much of his outstanding scholarly energy was devoted to understanding the stability of society and the importance of social participation for individual happiness. Whereas the lasting legacy of Marx is a theory that looks for the conflict-laden and changing aspects of social practices, the lasting legacy of Durkheim is a theory that examines the positive contributions of social patterns. Together they allow us to see both order and change.

Durkheim's major works are still considered essential reading in sociology. These include his studies of suicide, education, divorce, crime, and social change. Two enduring contributions are his ideas about the relationship between individuals and society and the development of a method for social science.

One of Durkheim's major concerns was the balance between social regulation and personal freedom. He argued that community standards of morality, which he called the collective conscience, not only confine our behavior but also give us a sense of belonging and integration. For example, many people complain about having to dress up; they complain about having to shave their faces or their legs, having to wear a tie or pantyhose. "What's wrong with my jeans?" they want to know. At the same time, most of us feel a sense of satisfaction when we appear in public in our best clothes. We know that we will be considered attractive and successful. Although we may complain about having to meet what appear to be arbitrary standards, we often feel a sense of satisfaction in being able to meet those standards successfully. In Durkheim's words, "institutions may impose themselves upon us, but we cling to them; they compel us, and we love them" (Durkheim [1895] 1938, 3). This beneficial regulation, however, must not rob the individual of all freedom of choice.

In his classic study, *Suicide*, Durkheim identified two types of suicide that stem from an imbalance between social regulation and personal freedom. Fatalistic suicide occurs when society overregulates and allows too little freedom, when our behavior is so confined by social institutions that we cannot exercise our independence ([1897] 1951, 276). Durkheim gave as an example of fatalistic suicide in the very young husband who feels overburdened by the demands of work, household, and family. Anomic suicide, on the other hand, occurs when there is too much freedom and too little regulation, when society's influence does not check individual passions ([1897] 1951, 258). Durkheim said that this kind of suicide is most likely to occur in times of rapid social change. When established ways of doing things have lost their meaning, but no clear alternatives have developed, individuals feel lost. The high suicide rate of Native Americans (approximately twice that of Caucasian Americans) is generally attributed to the weakening of traditional social regulation.

Durkheim was among the first to stress the importance of using reliable statistics to examine theories of social life. Each of his works illustrates his ideal social scientist: an objective observer who only seeks the facts. As sociology became an established discipline, this ideal of objective observation replaced Marx's social activism as the standard model for social science.

Max Weber (1864–1920)

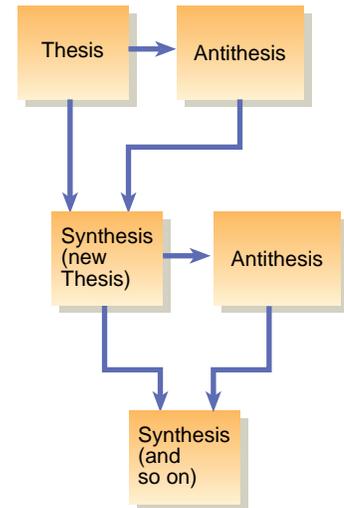
A German economist, historian, and philosopher, Max Weber (Veh-ber) provided the theoretical base for half a dozen areas of sociological inquiry. He wrote on religion, bureaucracy, method, and politics. In all these areas, his work is still valuable and insightful; it is covered in detail in later chapters. Three of Weber's more general contributions were an emphasis on the subjective meanings of social actions, on social as opposed to material causes, and on the need for objectivity in studying social issues.

Weber believed that knowing patterns of behavior was less important than knowing the meanings people attach to behavior. For example, Weber would argue that it is relatively meaningless to compile statistics such as one-half of all marriages contracted

FIGURE 1.1

The Dialectic

The dialectic model of change suggests that change occurs through conflict and resolution rather than through evolution.



Max Weber, 1864–1920

today may end in divorce compared to only 10 percent in 1890 (Cherlin 1992). More critical, he would argue, is understanding how the meaning of divorce has changed in the past hundred years. Weber's emphasis on the subjective meanings of human actions has been the foundation of scholarly work on topics as varied as religion and immigration.

Weber trained as an economist, and much of his work concerned the interplay of things material and things social. He rejected Marx's idea that economic factors were the determinants of all other social relationships. In a classic study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber tried to show how social and religious values may be the foundation of economic systems. This argument is developed more fully in Chapter 12, but its major thesis is that the religious values of early Protestantism (self-discipline, thrift, and individualism) were the foundation for capitalism.

Value-free sociology concerns itself with establishing what is, not what ought to be.

One of Weber's more influential ideas was his declaration that sociology must be **value-free**. Weber argued that sociology should be concerned with establishing what is and not what ought to be. Weber's dictum is at the heart of the standard scientific approach that is generally advocated by modern sociologists. Thus, although one may study poverty or racial inequality because of a sense of moral outrage, such feelings must be set aside to achieve an objective grasp of the facts. This position of neutrality is directly contradictory to the Marxian emphasis on social activism, and sociologists who adhere to Marxist principles generally reject the notion of value-free sociology. Most modern sociologists, however, try to be value-free in their scholarly work.

Sociology in the United States

Sociology in the United States developed somewhat differently than it did in Europe. Although U.S. sociology has the same intellectual roots as European sociology, it has some distinctive characteristics. Three features that have characterized U.S. sociology from its beginning are a concern with social problems, a reforming rather than a radical approach to these problems, and an emphasis on the scientific method.

Baptism is a religious ritual common to most Christian faiths. We can study what baptism means in Christian theology, we can compile statistics on the percentage of the population that has been baptized, or we can follow Weber's emphasis on subjective meanings by asking what it means to the individuals who take part in it. The typical Presbyterian baptism in which an infant's head is sprinkled with a few drops of water during a formal service is quite different in symbolic meaning from this woman's baptism by immersion in the River Jordan.



One reason that U.S. sociology developed differently from European sociology is that our social problems differ. Slavery, the Civil War, and high immigration rates, for example, made racism and ethnic discrimination much more salient issues in the United States. One of the first sociologists to study these issues was W. E. B. DuBois. DuBois, who received his doctorate in 1895 from Harvard University, devoted his career to developing empirical data about African Americans and to using those data to combat racism. The work of Jane Addams, another early sociologist, founder of Hull House and recipient of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize, nicely illustrates the reformist approach of much U.S. sociology. Addams and the other women who lived at Hull House used quantitative social science data to lobby successfully for legislation on safer working conditions, a better juvenile justice system, better public sanitation, and services for the poor (Deegan 1987).

As sociology became more established, it also became more conservative. In the years between the two World Wars, a new generation of sociology professors became convinced that social activism was incompatible with academic respectability. However, by the 1950s and into the 1960s, sociologists such as C. Wright Mills and Ralph Dahrendorf turned renewed attention to social problems and social conflict.

The first sociology course in the United States was taught at Yale University in 1876. By 1910, most colleges and universities in the United States offered sociology courses, although separate departments were slower to develop. Most of the courses were offered jointly with other departments, most often with economics but frequently with history, political science, philosophy, or general social science departments.

By 1960, almost all colleges and universities had departments of sociology, and by 1990, 120 of them offered doctoral programs. Higher-degree sociology programs are more popular in the United States than in any other country in the world. This is partly because sociology in the United States has always been oriented toward the practical as



W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963)



Jane Addams (1860–1935)

well as the theoretical. The focus has consistently been on finding solutions to social issues and problems, with the result that U.S. sociologists not only teach sociology but also work in government and industry.

As recognition that the solution to problems such as AIDS, environmental degradation, poverty, and ethnic conflict requires international effort, U.S. sociologists are developing closer working relationships with their counterparts in agencies and universities throughout the world.

Current Perspectives in Sociology

As this brief review of the history of sociological thought has demonstrated, there are many ways of approaching the study of human social interaction. The ideas of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others have given rise to dozens of theories about human behavior. In this section, we bring together and summarize ideas that are the foundation of the three dominant theoretical perspectives in sociology today: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Structural-Functional Theory

Structural-functional theory addresses the question of social organization and how it is maintained.

Structural-functional theory addresses the question of social organization and how it is maintained. This theoretical perspective has its roots in natural science and the analogy between society and an organism. In the analysis of a living organism, the scientist's task is to identify the various parts (structures) and to determine how they work (function). In the study of society, a sociologist with this perspective tries to identify the structures of society and how they function, hence the name *structural functionalism*.

The Assumptions Behind Structural Functionalism

In the sense that any study of society must begin with an identification of the parts of society and how they work, structural functionalism is basic to all perspectives. Scholars who use this perspective, however, are distinguished from other social analysts by their reliance on three major assumptions:

1. *Stability*. The chief evaluative criterion for any social pattern is whether it contributes to the maintenance of society.
2. *Harmony*. As the parts of an organism work together for the good of the whole, so the parts of society are also characterized by harmony.
3. *Evolution*. Change occurs through evolution—the adaptation of social structures to new needs and demands and the elimination of unnecessary or out-moded structures.

Because it emphasizes harmony and adaptation, structural functionalism is sometimes called consensus theory.

Structural-Functional Analysis

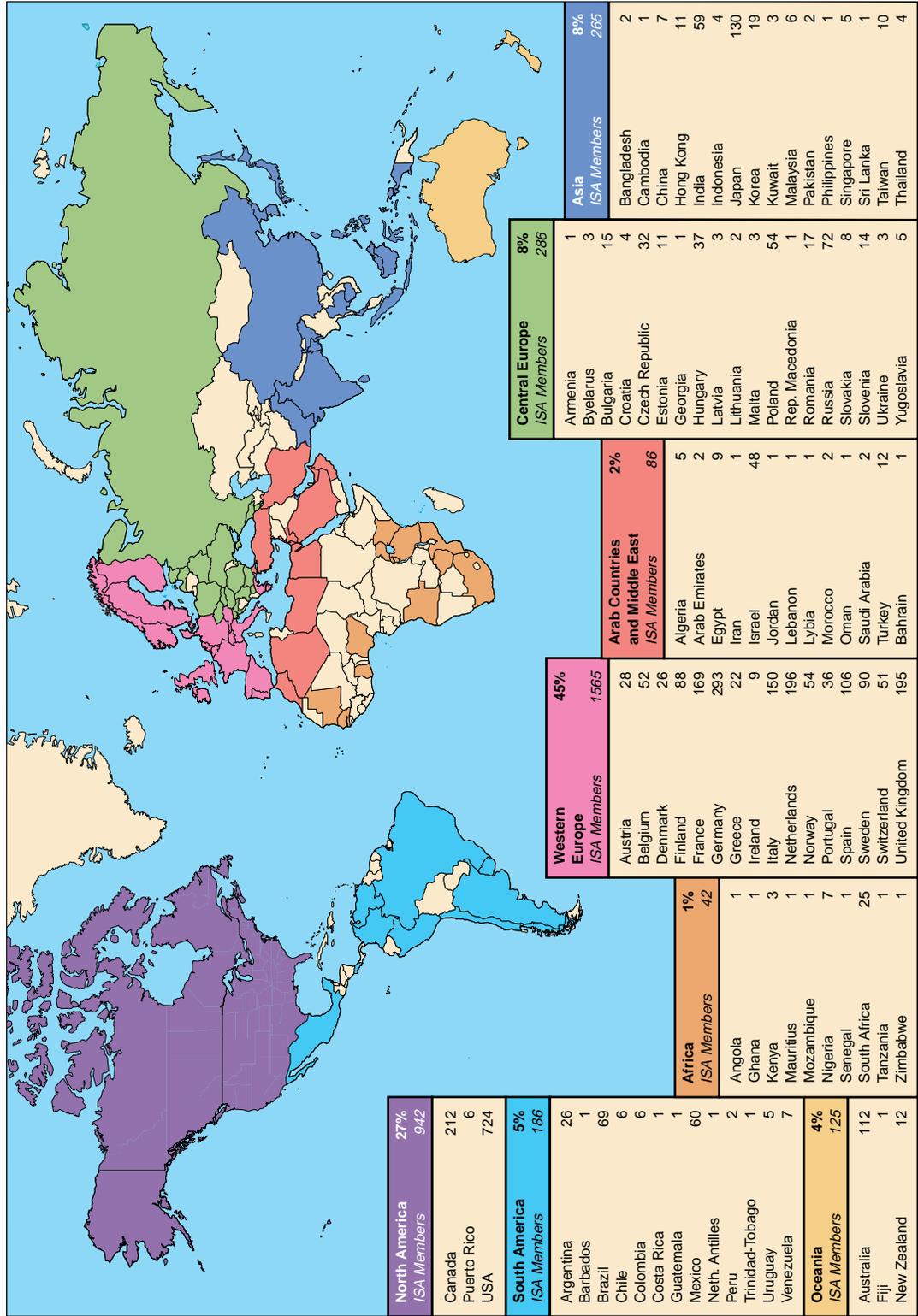
A structural-functional analysis asks two basic questions: What is the nature of this social structure (what patterns exist)? What are the consequences of this social structure (does it promote stability and harmony)? In this analysis, positive consequences are

MAP 1.1

Sociologists Around the World Who Are Members of the International Sociological Association, 1995

Sociology is a global discipline, although the vast majority of members in the International Sociological Association are citizens of wealthy, western nations. Many of these European and U.S. sociologists study developing regions of Asia, South America, or Africa. But indigenous peoples increasingly bring their own experiences to analyzing their societies, especially in issues concerning population and development.

SOURCE: Data supplied by the International Sociological Association.



Functions are consequences of social structures that have positive effects on the stability of society.

Dysfunctions are consequences of social structures that have negative effects on the stability of society.

Manifest functions or dysfunctions are consequences of social structures that are intended or recognized.

Latent functions or dysfunctions are consequences of social structures that are neither intended nor recognized.

called **functions** and negative consequences are called **dysfunctions**. A distinction is also drawn between **manifest** (recognized and intended) consequences and **latent** (unrecognized and unintended) consequences.

The basic strategy of looking for structures and their manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions is common to nearly all sociological analysis. Scholars from widely different theoretical perspectives use this framework for examining society. What sets structural-functional theorists apart from others who use this language are their assumptions about harmony and stability.

Many states are currently considering legislation that would allow women who have been victims of domestic violence to use the “battered women’s syndrome” as a defense in cases where they subsequently assault or kill their abuser. Such laws would explicitly recognize the right of women who assault or kill an abusive partner to plead not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. What would be the consequences of this new social structure? Its manifest function (intended positive outcome) is, of course, to give legal recognition to the devastating long-term psychological consequences of domestic violence. The manifest dysfunction is that some offenders might use the battered women’s syndrome defense as an excuse for a malicious, premeditated assault on a significant other. A latent dysfunction may be that women who are acquitted of legal charges on the basis of a temporary insanity plea could find it difficult to maintain custody of their children, given the stigma often attached to individuals with any diagnosis of mental disorder. Another latent outcome is more difficult to classify: The new policy may perpetuate the view that women are dependent on men. Is this persisting viewpoint a function or a dysfunction? This is a difficult question to answer from a neutral point of view, and it is here that the assumptions behind structural-functional theory guide the analysis. Following the assumption that the major criterion for judging a social structure is whether it contributes to the maintenance of society, structural-functional analysis has tended to call structures that preserve the status quo “functions” and those that challenge the status quo “dysfunctions.” Because gender bias in this law may contribute to an established pattern of women remaining in abusive family situations even when it is physically or emotionally dangerous for them to do so, the bias would be judged a latent function (see Table 1.1).

As this example suggests, a social pattern that contributes to the maintenance of society may benefit some groups more than others. A pattern may be functional—that is, help maintain the status quo—without being either desirable or equitable.

Evaluation of Structural Functionalism

Structural-functional theory tends to produce a static and conservative analysis of social systems (Turner 1982). This tendency is not a requirement for functional analysis, but it is commonplace. For example, an enumeration of the ways in which the

TABLE 1.1

A Structural-Functional Analysis of the “Battered Women’s Syndrome” as a Legal Defense

Structural-functional analysis examines the intended and unintended consequences of social structures. It also assesses whether the consequences are positive (functional) or negative (dysfunctional). There is no moral dimension to the assessment that an outcome is positive; it merely means that the outcome contributes to the stability of society.

	Manifest	Latent
Function	Gives legal recognition to the psychological consequences of domestic violence	Encourages the dependence of women on men
Dysfunction	May contribute to abuses of the criminal justice system	Makes it more difficult for victims of domestic violence to maintain custody



Structural-functional theory focuses on the benefits that social structures provide for individuals and society. It argues that the regularity and routine provided by such social structures as the family and government are as necessary as the regulations governing a school crossing. Theorists with this perspective often have a tendency to focus on the advantages rather than the disadvantages of particular social structures.

education system contributes to the maintenance of inequality (an argument outlined in Chapter 12) is not the same thing as saying that maintaining inequality is a good thing. The distinction is a fine one, however, and in general structural functionalism tends to be a more attractive perspective for those who want to preserve the status quo than for those who want to challenge it.

Conflict Theory

If structural-functional theory sees the world in terms of consensus and stability, then it can be said that conflict theory sees the world in terms of conflict and change. Conflict theorists contend that a full understanding of society requires a critical examination of the competition and conflict in society, especially of the processes by which some people are winners and others losers. As a result, **conflict theory** addresses the points of stress and conflict in society and the ways in which they contribute to social change.

Conflict theory addresses the points of stress and conflict in society and the ways in which they contribute to social change.

Assumptions Underlying Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is derived from Marx's ideas. The following are three primary assumptions of modern conflict theory:

1. *Competition.* Competition over scarce resources (money, leisure, sexual partners, and so on) is at the heart of all social relationships. Competition rather than consensus is characteristic of human relationships.
2. *Structural inequality.* Inequalities in power and reward are built into all social structures. Individuals and groups that benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained.
3. *Revolution.* Change occurs as a result of conflict between competing interests rather than through adaptation. It is often abrupt and revolutionary rather than evolutionary.

THINKING

CRITICALLY

Consider how a structural-functional analysis of gender roles might differ from a conflict analysis. Are men or women more likely to choose conflict theory?

Conflict Analysis

Like structural functionalists, conflict theorists are interested in social structures. The two questions they ask, however, are different. Conflict theorists ask: Who benefits from those social structures? How do those who benefit maintain their advantage?

A conflict analysis of modern education, for example, notes that the highest graduation rates, the best grades, and the highest monetary returns per year of education go to students from advantaged backgrounds. The answer to the question “Who benefits?” is that educational benefits go to the children of those who are already well off. Conflict theorists go on to ask how this situation developed and how it is maintained. Their answers (developed more extensively in Chapter 12) focus on questions such as how are educational resources (texts, teachers, school buildings) allocated by neighborhood and whether the curriculum is designed for one kind of child (white middle class) rather than other kinds. They also look for ways in which this system benefits the powerful—for example, by creating a class of nongraduates who can be hired cheaply.

Evaluation of Conflict Theory

Thirty years ago, sociology was dominated by structural-functional theory, but conflict theory has become increasingly popular. It allows us to ask many of the same questions as structural-functional theory (What is a certain social structure? What are its outcomes?), but it also encourages us to take a more critical look at outcomes; for example, this particular structure is functional for whom? Together the two perspectives provide a balanced view, allowing us to analyze the sources of both conflict and harmony, order and change.

Conflict theory tends to produce a critical picture of society, and the emphasis on social activism and social criticism that is at the heart of conflict theory tends to attract scholars who would like to change society. In general, conflict theorists place less emphasis than other sociologists on the importance of value-free sociology.

What did Jewish immigrants to New York City in the early twentieth century have in common with Latinas now living and working in Los Angeles? The answer is that most were/are poorly paid, with many finding work in garment industry sweatshops such as the one pictured here. Conflict theory takes a critical look at who benefits from the low wages of immigrants (and women) and at what social structures serve to maintain this centuries-old pattern.



Symbolic Interaction Theory

Both structural-functional and conflict theories focus on social structures and the relationships between them. What about the relationship between individuals and social structures? Sociologists who focus on the ways that individuals relate to and are affected by social structures generally use symbolic interaction theory. **Symbolic interaction theory** addresses the subjective meanings of human acts and the processes through which we come to develop and share these subjective meanings. The name of this theory comes from the fact that it studies the *symbolic* (or subjective) meaning of human *interaction*.

Symbolic interaction theory addresses the subjective meanings of human acts and the processes through which people come to develop and communicate shared meanings.

Assumptions Underlying Symbolic Interaction Theory

When symbolic interactionists study human behavior, they begin with three major premises (Blumer 1969):

1. *Symbolic meanings are important.* Any behavior, gesture, or word can have multiple interpretations (can symbolize many things). In order to understand human behavior, we must learn what it means to the participants.
2. *Meanings grow out of relationships.* When relationships change, so do meanings.
3. *Meanings are negotiated.* We do not accept others' meanings uncritically. Each of us plays an active role in negotiating the meaning that things will have for us.

THINKING

CRITICALLY

Can you think of situations where a change of friends, living arrangements, or jobs has caused you to have new interpretations of the events surrounding you?

Symbolic Interaction Analysis

These premises direct symbolic interactionists to the study of how individuals are shaped by relationships and social structures. For example, symbolic interactionists would be interested in how growing up in a large as opposed to a small family or in a working-class as opposed to an upper-class family affects individual attitudes and behaviors.

Symbolic interactionists are also interested in the active role of the individual in modifying and negotiating his or her way through these relationships. Why do two children raised in the same family turn out differently? The answer lies in part in the fact that each child experiences subtly different relationships and situations; the meanings that the youngest child derives from the family experience may be different from those the oldest child derives.

Most generally, symbolic interaction is concerned with how individuals are shaped by relationships. This question leads first to a concern with childhood and the initial steps we take to learn and interpret our social worlds. It is also concerned with later relationships with lovers and friends, employers, and teachers.

Evaluation of Symbolic Interaction Theory

The value of symbolic interaction is that it focuses attention on the personal relationships and encounters that are so important in our everyday lives. By showing how the relationships dictated by the larger social structure affect our subjective worlds, symbolic interactionists give us a more complete picture of these social structures.

Neither symbolic interactionism nor the conflict or structural-functional theories are complete in themselves. Symbolic interactionism focuses on individual relationships, and the other two theories focus largely on society. Together, however,

CONCEPT SUMMARY		<i>Major Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology</i>		
	STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM	CONFLICT THEORY	SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM	
Nature of society	Interrelated social structures that fit together to form an integrated whole	Competing interests, each seeking to secure its own ends	Interacting individuals and groups	
Basis of interaction	Consensus and shared values	Constraint, power, and competition	Shared symbolic meanings	
Major question	What are social structures? Do they contribute to social stability?	Who benefits? How are these benefits maintained?	How do social structures relate to individual subjective experiences?	
Level of analysis	Social structure	Social structure	Interpersonal interaction	

they provide a valuable set of tools for understanding the relationship between the individual and society.

Interchangeable Lenses

As this brief review of major theoretical perspectives illustrates, the field of sociology uses a variety of theoretical perspectives. These perspectives can be regarded as interchangeable lenses through which society may be viewed. Just as a telephoto lens is not always superior to a wide-angle lens, one sociological theory will not always be superior to another.

Occasionally, the same subject can be viewed through any of these perspectives. For example, one can examine prostitution through the theoretical lens of structural-functional, conflict, or symbolic interaction theory. Following are three snapshots of female prostitution using these perspectives.

The Functions of Prostitution

The functional analysis of female prostitution begins by examining its social structure. It identifies the recurrent patterns of relationships among pimps, prostitutes, and customers. Then it examines the consequences of this social structure. In 1961, Kingsley Davis listed the following outcomes of prostitution:

- It provides a sexual outlet for men who cannot compete on the marriage market—the physically or mentally handicapped or the very poor.
- It provides a sexual outlet for men who are away from home a lot, such as salesmen and sailors.
- It provides a sexual outlet for the kinky.

Provision of these services is the manifest or intended function of prostitution. Davis goes on to note that, by providing these services, prostitution has the latent function of protecting the institution of marriage from malcontents who, for one reason or another, do not receive adequate sexual service through marriage. Prostitution is the safety

valve that makes it possible to restrict respectable sexual relationships (and hence child-bearing and childrearing) to marital relationships while still allowing for the variability of human sexual appetites.

Prostitution: Marketing a Scarce Resource

Conflict theorists analyze prostitution as part of the larger problem of unequal allocation of scarce resources. Women, they argue, have not had equal access to economic opportunity. In some societies, they are forbidden to own property; in others, they suffer substantial discrimination in opportunities to work and earn. Because of this inability to support themselves, women have had to rely on economic support from men. They get this support by exchanging the one scarce resource they have to offer: sexual availability. To a Marxist, it makes little difference whether a woman barter her sexual availability by the job (prostitution) or by contract (marriage); the underlying cause is the same.

Although most analyses of prostitution focus on adult women, the conflict perspective helps explain the growing problem of prostitution among runaway and homeless boys and girls. The young people have few realistic opportunities to support themselves by regular jobs: many are not old enough to work legally and, in any case, would be unable to support themselves adequately on the minimum wage. Their young bodies are their most marketable resource.

Prostitution: Learning the Trade

Symbolic interactionists who examine prostitution will take an entirely different perspective. They will want to know how prostitutes learn the trade and how they manage their self-concept so that they continue to think positively of themselves in spite of engaging in a socially disapproved profession. One such study was done by Barbara Heyl, who intensively interviewed a middle-aged woman who had spent her career first as a prostitute and then as a madam and trainer of prostitutes. Heyl found that much of the training in the prostitute's role consists of business training, not sex. They learn



Prostitution occurs in nearly every culture and every historical period. Consequently, sociologists have been interested in trying to explain why this pattern of social behavior is so persistent and what meaning it has to its participants. Conflict sociologists have focused on prostitution as an economic relationship created by differential access to legitimate rewards. Structural-functionalists have emphasized that prostitution is voluntary and benefits both prostitutes and society. Symbolic interactionists have analyzed the social setting where prostitution occurs, the gestures, vocabularies, and symbols used to transact business.

how to hustle—how to get the maximum amount of money for the minimum amount of work. In speaking of what her training produces, the madam says she is turning out professional hustlers, not whores. She is proud of her work. She says, “They find that I am teaching them how to make money, to dress tastefully, to conserve and be poised with men, to be knowledgeable about good hygiene, to have good working habits, such as punctuality, which will help them whether they stay in the rackets or not, and to have self-respect” (Heyl 1979, 105).

Summary

As these examples illustrate, many topics can be fruitfully studied with any of the three theoretical perspectives. Just as a photographer with only one lens can shoot almost any subject, the sociologist with only one perspective will not be unduly limited in what to examine. One will generally get better pictures, however, by selecting the theoretical perspective that is best suited to the particular subject. In general, structural functionalism and conflict theory are well suited to the study of social structures, or **macrosociology**. Symbolic interactionism is well suited to the study of the relationship between individual meanings and social structures, or **microsociology**.

Macrosociology focuses on social structures and organizations and the relationships between them.

Microsociology focuses on interactions among individuals.

The Science of Society

The things that sociologists study—for example, deviance, marital happiness, and poverty—have probably interested you for a long time. You may have developed your own opinions about why some people have good marriages and some have bad marriages or why some people break the law and others do not. Sociology is an academic discipline that uses the procedures of science to critically examine commonsense explanations of human social behavior. Science is not divorced from common sense but is an extension of it.

Defining Science

The ultimate aim of science is to better understand the world. Science directs us to find this understanding by observing and measuring what actually happens. This is not the only means of acquiring knowledge. Some people get their perceptions from the Bible or the Koran or the Book of Mormon. Others get their answers from their mothers or their husbands or their girlfriends. When you ask such people, “But how do you know that that is true?” their answer is simple. They say “My mother told me” or “I read it in *Reader’s Digest*.”

Science differs from these other ways of knowing in that it requires empirical evidence as a basis for knowledge; that is, it requires evidence that can be confirmed by the normal human senses. We must be able to see, hear, smell, or feel it. Before a social scientist would agree that she or he “knew” religious differences increased the likelihood of divorce, for example, she or he would want to see statistical evidence.

Science has two major goals: accurate description and accurate explanation. In sociology, we are concerned with accurate descriptions of human interaction (how many people marry, how many people abuse their children, how many people flunk out of school). After we know the patterns, we hope to be able to explain them, to say *why* people marry, abuse their children, or flunk out of school.

Science is a way of knowing based on empirical evidence.

The Research Process

At each stage of the scientific process, certain conventional procedures are used to ensure that a researcher's findings will be accepted as scientific knowledge. The procedures used in sociological research are covered in depth in classes on research methods, statistics, and theory construction. At this point, we merely want to introduce a few ideas that you must understand if you are to be an educated consumer of research results. We look at the general research process and review three concepts central to research: variables, operational definitions, and sampling.

Step One: Stating the Problem

The first step in the research process is the careful statement of the issue to be investigated. We may select a topic because of a personal experience or out of commonsense observation. For example, we may have observed that black Americans appear more likely to experience unemployment and poverty than white Americans. Alternatively, we might begin with a theory that predicts, for instance, that black Americans will have higher unemployment rates than white Americans because they have been discriminated against in schools and the workplace. In either case, we begin by reviewing the research of other scholars to help us specify exactly what it is that we want to know. If a good deal of research has already been conducted on the issue and good theoretical explanations have been advanced for some of the patterns, then a problem may be stated in the form of a **hypothesis**—a statement about empirical relationships that we expect to observe if our theory is correct. A hypothesis must be testable; that is, there must be some way in which data can help weed out a wrong conclusion and identify a correct one. For example, the hypothesis that mothers ought to stay home with their children cannot be tested; the hypothesis that children who spend their early years in day-care centers are emotionally less secure than those who stay at home with their mothers can be tested.

A **hypothesis** is a statement about relationships that we expect to find if our theory is correct.

Step Two: Gathering Data

To narrow the scope of a problem to manageable size, researchers focus on variables rather than people.

VARIABLES. **Variables** are measured characteristics that vary from one individual or group to the next (Babbie 1995). If we wish to analyze differences in rates of black/white unemployment, we need information on two variables: race and unemployment. The individuals included in our study would be complex and interesting human beings, but for our purposes, we would be interested only in these two aspects of each person's life.

When we hypothesize a cause-and-effect relationship between two variables, the cause is called the **independent variable**, and the effect is called the **dependent variable**. In the example of the effects of day care on children's emotional security, attending day care is the independent variable, and emotional security is the dependent variable; that is, we hypothesize that security depends on whether or not a child attends a day-care program.

Variables are measured characteristics that vary from one individual or group to the next.

The **independent variable** is the variable that does the causing in cause-and-effect relationships.

The **dependent variable** is the effect in cause-and-effect relationships. It is dependent on the actions of the independent variable.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS. In order to describe a pattern or test a hypothesis, each variable must be precisely defined. Before we can describe racial differences in unemployment rates, for instance, we need to be able to decide whether an individual is unemployed. To assess the effects of day care on emotional security, we must be able

Operational definitions describe the exact procedures by which a variable is measured.

A **sample** is a systematic selection of representative cases from the larger population.

Correlation occurs when there is an empirical relationship between two variables.

A **theory** is an interrelated set of assumptions that explains observed patterns.

to sort children into at least two categories: those who attend day care and those who do not. The exact procedure by which a variable is measured is called an **operational definition**. Reaching general agreement about these definitions may pose a problem. For instance, people are typically considered to be unemployed if they are actively seeking work but cannot find it. This definition ignores all the people who became so discouraged in their search for work that they simply gave up. Obviously, including discouraged workers in our definition of the unemployed might lead to a different description of patterns of unemployment. In the day-care example, exposure to day care might be defined simply in terms of whether a child attends a day-care program, but it might also be defined in terms of the number of hours per week a child spends in a day-care facility or the number of years a child has been attending. Again, research results may vary depending on how the day-care experience is measured. Consumers of research should always check carefully to see what operational definitions are being used when they evaluate results.

SAMPLING. It would be time-consuming, expensive, and probably nearly impossible to get information on race and employment status for all adults or on the emotional security and day-care experiences of all children. It is also unnecessary. The process of **sampling**—taking a systematic selection of representative cases from a larger population—allows us to get accurate empirical data at a fraction of the cost that examining all possible cases would involve.

Sampling involves two processes: (1) obtaining a list of the population you want to study and (2) selecting a representative subset or sample from the list. Selecting from the list is easy; choosing a relatively large number by a random procedure generally assures that the sample will be unbiased. The more difficult task is getting a list. A central principle of sampling is that a sample is only representative of the list from which it is drawn. If we draw a list of people from the telephone directory, then our sample can only be said to describe households listed in the directory; it will omit those with unlisted numbers, those with no telephones, and those who have moved since the directory was issued. The best surveys begin with a list of all the households or telephone numbers in a target region.

Step Three: Finding Patterns

The third step in the research process is to analyze the data, looking for patterns. If we study unemployment, for example, we will find that black Americans are more than twice as likely as white Americans to experience unemployment (U.S. Department of Labor 1997). This generalization notes a **correlation**, an empirical relationship between two variables—in this case, between race and employment.

Step Four: Generating Theories

After a pattern is found, the next step in the research process is to explain it. As we will discuss in the section on survey research, finding a correlation between two variables does not necessarily mean that one variable causes the other. For example, even though there is a correlation between race and unemployment, not all black Americans are unemployed, and being black is not the only cause of unemployment. Nevertheless, if we have good empirical evidence that being black increases the probability of unemployment, the next task is to explain why that should be so. Explanations are usually embodied in a **theory**, an interrelated set of assumptions that explains observed patterns. Theory always goes beyond the facts at hand; it includes untested assumptions that explain the empirical evidence.

In the unemployment example, one might theorize that the reason black Americans face more unemployment than whites is because many of today's black adults grew up in a time when the racial difference in educational opportunity was much greater than it is now. This simple explanation goes beyond the facts at hand to include some assumptions about how education is related to race and unemployment. Although theory rests on an empirical generalization, the theory itself is not empirical; it is . . . well, theoretical.

It should be noted that many different theories can be compatible with a given empirical generalization. We have proposed that education explains the correlation between race and unemployment. An alternative theory might argue that the correlation arises because of discrimination. Because there are often many plausible explanations for any correlation, theory development is not the end of the research process. We must go on to test the assumption of the theory by gathering new data.

The scientific process can be viewed as a wheel that continuously moves us from theory to data and back again (Figure 1.2). Two examples illustrate how theory leads to the need for new data and how data can lead to the development of new theory.

As we have noted, data show that unemployment rates are higher among black Americans than among white Americans. One theoretical explanation for this pattern links higher black unemployment to educational deficits. From this theory, we can deduce the hypothesis that blacks and whites of equal education will experience equal unemployment. To test this hypothesis, we need more data, this time about education and its relationship to race and unemployment.

A study by Melvin Thomas (1993) tests a closely related hypothesis. Thomas asked whether educational deficits explained why African Americans earned less income than whites. He found the hypothesis was not supported: Even if educational levels were equal, the odds were that whites would earn more than African Americans.

Jay Belsky (1990) has reviewed a decade of research on the effects of day care on children's socioemotional development. In reviewing the literature, Belsky notes that some studies show that children with day-care experience were more likely to be attached insecurely to their parents; other studies found that day care had no effects on security. The data show no clear pattern in part, Belsky hypothesizes, because researchers have failed to take into account other variables that may affect children's development—

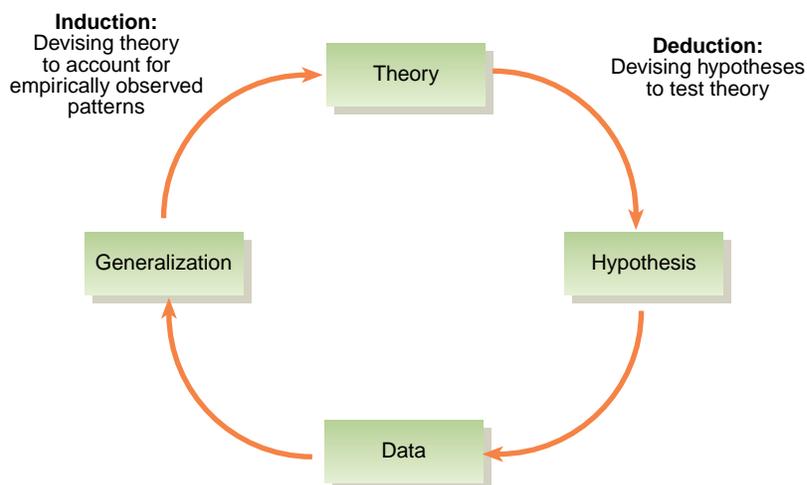


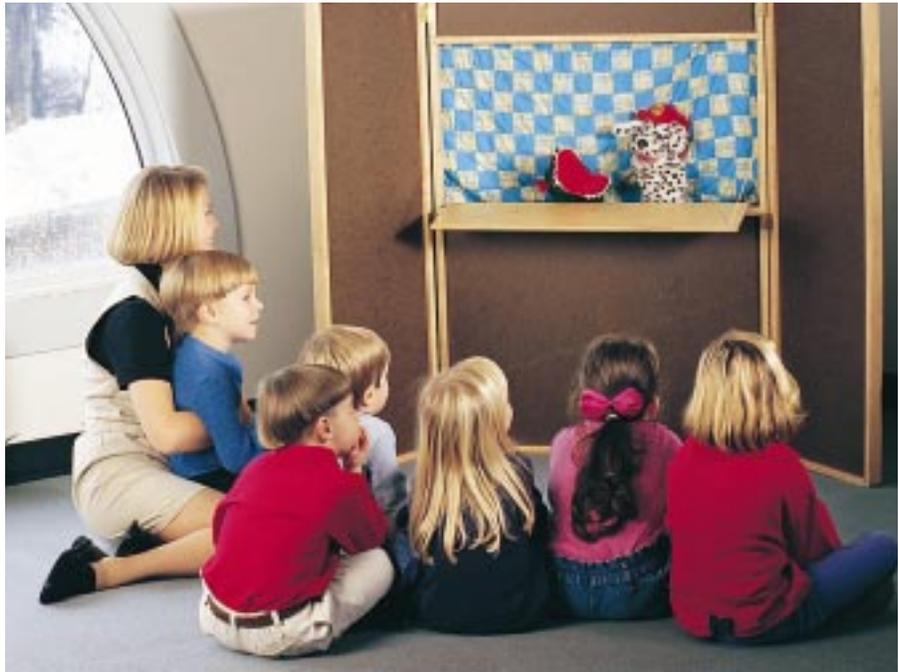
FIGURE 1.2

The Wheel of Science

The process of science can be viewed as a continuously turning wheel that moves us from data to theory and back again.

SOURCE: Adapted from Wallace, Walter. 1969. *Sociological Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

Day care plays an increasingly important role in the lives of children, and researchers remain uncertain about its effects on relationships between parents and their offspring. One major hypothesis is that it is not whether or not children attend day care that matters for children's development but rather the quality of the day care provided.



Induction is the process of moving from data to theory by devising theories that account for empirically observed patterns.

Deduction is the process of moving from theory to data by testing hypotheses drawn from theory.

the quality of the day care, the quality of maternal employment, and whether children were in day care under one year of age.

Thomas's findings and Belsky's review can be the basis for revised theories. These new theories will again be subject to empirical testing, and the process will begin anew. In the language of science, the process of moving from data to theory is called **induction**, and the process of moving from theory to data is called **deduction**. These two processes and their interrelationships are also illustrated in Figure 1.2.

Three Strategies for Gathering Data

The theories and findings reported in this book represent a variety of research strategies. Three of the more general strategies are outlined here: experiments, survey research, and participant observation. In this section, we review each method and illustrate its advantages and disadvantages by showing how it would approach the test of a common hypothesis, namely, that alcohol use reduces grades in school.

The **experiment** is a method in which the researcher manipulates independent variables to test theories of cause and effect.

An **experimental group** is the group in an experiment that experiences the independent variable. Results for this group are compared with those for the control group.

A **control group** is the group in an experiment that does not receive the independent variable.

The Experiment

The **experiment** is a research method in which the researcher manipulates the independent variable to test theories of cause and effect. Sometimes, experiments are conducted in carefully controlled conditions in laboratories, but often they take place in normal classrooms and work environments. In the classic experiment, a group that experiences the independent variable, an **experimental group**, is compared with a **control group** that does not. If the groups are equal as far as everything else, a comparison between them will show whether experience with the independent variable is associated with unique change in the dependent variable.

An experiment designed to assess whether alcohol use affects grades, for example, would need to compare an experimental group that drank alcohol with a control group that did not. A hypothetical experiment might begin by observing student grades for several weeks until students' normal performance levels had been established. Then the class would be divided randomly into two groups. If the initial pool is large enough, we can assume that the two groups are probably equal on nearly everything. For example, we assume that both groups probably contain an equal mix of good and poor students, of lazy and ambitious students. The control group might be requested to abstain from alcohol use for five weeks, and the experimental group might be requested to drink three times a week during the same period. At the end of the five weeks, we would compare the grades of the two groups. Both groups might have experienced a drop in grades because of normal factors such as fatigue, burnout, and overwork. The existence of the control group, however, allows us to determine whether alcohol use causes a reduction in grades over and above that which normally occurs.

Experiments are excellent devices for testing hypotheses about cause and effect. They have three drawbacks, however. First, experiments are often unethical because they expose subjects to the possibility of harm. The study on alcohol use, for example, might damage student grades, introduce students to bad habits, or otherwise injure them. A more extreme example might be the question of whether people who were abused as children are more likely to abuse their own children. We could not set up an experiment in which one of two randomly assigned groups of children was beaten and the other not. Because of such ethical issues, many areas of sociological interest cannot be studied with the experimental method.

A second drawback to experiments is that subjects often behave differently when they are under scientific observation than they would in their normal environment. For example, although alcohol consumption might normally have the effect of lowering student grades, the participants in our study might find the research so interesting that their grades would actually improve. In this case, the subjects' knowledge that they are participating in an experiment affects their response to the independent variable. This response is called the **guinea-pig effect**. In sociology, it is often called the Hawthorne effect because it was first documented in a research project at the Hawthorne Electric plant.

A final drawback to the experimental method is that laboratory experiments are often highly artificial. When researchers try to set up social situations in laboratories, they often must omit many of the factors that would influence the same behavior in a real-life situation. The result is often a very unnatural situation. Like the guinea-pig effect, this artificiality has the effect of reducing our confidence that the results that appear in the experiment can be generalized to the more complex conditions of the real world.

Because of these disadvantages and because of ethical limitations, relatively little sociological research uses the controlled experiment. The areas in which it has been most useful are the study of small-group interaction and the simulation of situations that seldom occur in real life.

The Survey

The most common research strategy in sociology is the survey. In **survey research**, the investigator asks a relatively large number of people the same set of standardized questions. These questions may be asked in a personal interview, over the telephone, or in a paper-and-pencil format. Because it asks the same questions of a large number of

The **guinea-pig effect** occurs when subjects' knowledge that they are participating in an experiment affects their response to the independent variable.

Survey research is a method that involves asking a relatively large number of people the same set of standardized questions.

Incidence is the frequency with which an attitude or behavior occurs.

Trends are changes in a variable over time.

Differentials are differences in the incidence of a phenomenon across subcategories of the population.

A **cross-sectional design** uses a sample (or cross section) of the population at a single point in time.

The **panel design** follows a sample over a period of time.

people, it is an ideal method for furnishing evidence on incidence, trends, and differentials. Thus, survey data on alcohol use may allow us to say such things as the following: Eighty percent of the undergraduates of Midwestern State currently use alcohol (**incidence**); the proportion using alcohol has remained about the same over the last 10 years (**trend**); and the proportion using alcohol is higher for males than females (**differential**). Survey research is extremely versatile; it can be used to study attitudes, behavior, ideals, and values. If you can think of some way to ask a question about such matters, then you can study it with survey research.

Most surveys use what is called a **cross-sectional design**; they take a sample (or cross section) of the population at a single point in time and expect it to show some variability on the independent variable. Thus in our study of alcohol use we would take a sample of students, expecting to find that some of them drink and some do not. We could then compare these two groups to see which gets the best grades.

In 1997, we conducted such a survey of our undergraduate students. The results are displayed in Table 1.2. The table shows that students who drink alcohol report getting worse grades: Although 51 percent of the nondrinkers have GPAs over 3.5, only 28 percent of those who admit drinking do. At the other end of the grade distribution, drinkers were more likely than abstainers to report a grade point average of less than 2.5.

The difficulty with the cross-sectional design is that we cannot reach any firm conclusions about cause and effect. We cannot tell whether alcohol use causes bad grades or whether bad grades lead to alcohol use. A more striking problem is that we cannot be sure there is a cause-and-effect relationship at all. Because the drinkers and the abstainers were not randomly assigned to the two categories, the two groups differ on many other variables besides drinking. For example, the drinkers may have less conventional families, come from worse neighborhoods, or simply hate reading. It could be that one of these factors is causing the poor grades and that alcohol-related behavior is just coincidental.

A different strategy used in survey research is the **panel design**, which follows a sample over a period of time. During this period of time, some sample members will experience the independent variable, and we can observe how they differ from those who do not both before and after this experience. To use this design for examining the effect of alcohol use on grades would require surveying a group of young people at several points in time, say, from when they were 12 until they were 25. This design would not alter the fact that some people choose to drink and others do not, but it would let us look at the same people before and after their decision. It would allow us to see whether students' grades actually fell after they started to drink alcohol or whether they

TABLE 1.2

Cross-Tabulation of College Grades By Use of Alcohol

556 Undergraduate Students at a Midwestern State University, 1997.

College Grades	USE ALCOHOL	
	No	Yes
B+ or A	51%	28%
C+ or B	42	60
Below C+	7	12
Total	100%	100%
Number	114	452

were always poor students. The major disadvantage of a panel design is, of course, that it is expensive and time-consuming.

Another important drawback of survey research in general is that respondents may misrepresent the truth. Prejudiced people may tell you that they are unprejudiced, and only a small fraction of those who abuse their children are likely to admit it. This misrepresentation is known as **social-desirability bias**—the tendency for people to color the truth so that they appear to be nicer, richer, and generally more desirable than they really are. The consequences of this bias vary in seriousness depending on the research aim and topic. Obviously, it is a greater problem for such sensitive topics as drug use and prejudice.

Survey research is designed to obtain standard answers to standard questions. It is not the best strategy for studying deviant or undesirable behaviors or for getting at ideas and feelings that cannot easily be reduced to questionnaire form. An additional drawback of survey research is that it is designed to study individuals rather than contexts. Thus, it focuses on the individual alcohol user or abstainer rather than the setting and relationships in which drinking takes place. For these kinds of answers, we must turn to participant observation.

Participant Observation

Under the label **participant observation**, we classify a variety of research strategies—participating, interviewing, observing—that examine the context and meanings of human behavior. Instead of sending forth an army of interviewers, participant observers go out into the field themselves to see firsthand what is going on. These strategies are used more often by sociologists interested in symbolic interaction theory—that is, researchers who want to understand subjective meanings and personal relationships. The goals of this research method are to discover patterns of interaction and to find the meaning of the patterns for the individuals involved.

The three major tasks involved in participant observation are interviewing, participating, and observing. A researcher goes to the scene of the action, where she may interview people informally in the normal course of conversation, participate in whatever

Social-desirability bias is the tendency of people to color the truth so that they sound nicer, richer, and more desirable than they really are.

THINKING

CRITICALLY

Consider what study design you could ethically use to determine whether drinking alcohol, living in a sorority, or growing up with a single parent reduces academic performance.

Participant observation includes a variety of research strategies—participating, interviewing, observing—that examine the context and meanings of human behavior.



What is going on here? Survey research is not going to give you the answer. Not only is there no time to select a sample and draw up a questionnaire, the participants do not appear to be particularly cooperative respondents. When we want to study a social process or when we want to study deviant and uncooperative populations, participant observation is usually our best research strategy. In this case—a confrontation between white supremacists, the police, and anti-KKK protestors at the “Aryan Woodstock” festival—a researcher would need to be on the scene for as long as possible and then track down participants later to discuss their behavior and motivations.

they are doing, and observe the activities of other participants. Not every participant observation study includes all three dimensions equally. A participant observer studying alcohol use on campus, for example, would not need to get smashed every night. She would, however, probably do long, informal interviews with both users and nonusers, attend student parties and activities, and attempt to get a feel for how alcohol use fits in with certain student subcultures.

The data produced by participant observation are often based on small numbers of individuals who have not been selected according to random-sampling techniques. The data tend to be unsystematic and the samples not very representative; however, we do learn a great deal about the few individuals involved. This detail is often useful for generating ideas that can then be examined more systematically with other techniques. In this regard, participant observation may be viewed as a form of initial exploration of a research topic.

In some situations, however, participant observation is the only reasonable way to approach a subject. This is especially likely when we are examining undesirable behavior, real behavior rather than attitudes, or uncooperative populations. In the first instance, social-desirability bias makes it difficult to get good information about undesirable behavior. Thus, what we know about running a brothel (Heyl 1979) or the homeless (Snow & Anderson 1987) rests largely on the reports of participant observers. This style of research produces fewer distortions than would have occurred if a middle-class survey researcher dropped by to ask the participants about their activities.

In the second case, participant observation is well suited to studies of behavior—what people do rather than what they say they do. Behaviors are sometimes misrepresented in surveys simply because people are unaware of their actions or don't remember them very well. For example, individuals may believe they are not prejudiced; yet observational research will demonstrate that these same people systematically choose not to sit next to persons of another race on the bus or in public places. Sometimes, actions speak louder than words.

In the third case, we know that survey research works best with people who are predisposed to cooperate with authorities and who are relatively literate. Where either one or both of these conditions is not met, survey research may not be possible. For this reason there is little survey research on prison populations, juvenile gangs, preschoolers, or rioters. Participant observation is often the only means to gather data on these populations.

A major disadvantage of participant observation is that the observations and generalizations rely on the interpretation of one investigator. Because researchers are not robots, it seems likely that their findings reflect some of their own world view. This is a greater problem with participant observation than with survey or experimental work, but all social science suffers to some extent from this phenomenon. The answer to this dilemma is **replication**, redoing the same study with another investigator to see if the same results occur.

Replication is the repetition of empirical studies with another investigator or a different sample to see if the same results occur.

Alternative Strategies

The bulk of sociological research uses these three strategies. There are, however, a dozen or more other imaginative and useful ways of doing research, many of them involving the analysis of social artifacts rather than people. For example, a study of women's magazines of the nineteenth century illustrates changing attitudes towards spinsterhood during that period (Hickok 1981). A study of church paintings, epitaphs, and cemeteries over the centuries has shown how our ideas about death have changed (Aries

CONCEPT SUMMARY		<i>Research Methods</i>
CONTROLLED EXPERIMENTS		
Procedure	Dividing subjects into two equivalent groups, applying the independent variable to one group only, and observing the differences between the two groups on the dependent variable	
Advantages	Excellent for analysis of cause-and-effect relationships; can stimulate events and behaviors that do not occur outside the laboratory in any regular way	
Disadvantages	Based on small, nonrepresentative samples examined under highly artificial circumstances; unclear that people would behave the same way outside the laboratory; unethical to experiment in many areas	
SURVEY RESEARCH		
Procedure	Asking the same set of standard questions of a relatively large, systematically selected sample	
Advantages	Very versatile—can study anything that we can ask about; can be done with large, random samples so that results represent many people; good for incidence, trends, and differentials	
Disadvantages	Shallow—does not get at depth and shades of meaning; affected by social-desirability bias; better for studying people than situations	
PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION		
Procedure	Observing people's behavior in its normal context; experiencing others' social settings as a participant; in-depth interviewing	
Advantages	Seeing behavior in context; getting at meanings associated with behavior; seeing what people do rather than what they say they do	
Disadvantages	Limited to small, nonrepresentative samples; dependent on interpretation of single investigator	

1974). Studies of court records and government statistics have demonstrated incidence, trends, and differentials in many areas of sociological interest.

Sociologists: What Do They Do?

A concern with social problems has been a continuing focus of U.S. sociology. This is evident both in the kinds of courses that sociology departments offer (social problems, race and ethnic relations, crime and delinquency, for example) and in the kinds of research sociologists do.

The majority of U.S. sociologists are employed in colleges and universities, where they teach and do research. Much of this research is *basic sociology*, which has no immediate practical application and is motivated simply by a desire to describe or explain some aspect of human social behavior more fully. Even basic research, however, often has implications for social policy.

In addition to the pure research motivated by scholarly curiosity, an increasing proportion of sociologists are engaged in *applied sociology*, seeking to provide immediate practical answers to problems of government, industry, or individuals. The proportion of sociologists who are engaged in applied work has more than doubled in the last decade, from 9 percent in 1976 to more than 25 percent today. This increase is evident in government, business, and nonprofit organizations.

Working in Government

A long tradition of sociological work in government has to do with measuring and forecasting population trends. This work is vital for decisions about where to put roads and schools and when to stop building schools and start building nursing homes. In addition, sociologists have been employed to design and evaluate public policies in a wide variety of areas. In World War II, sociologists designed policies to increase the morale and fighting efficiency of the armed forces. During the so-called war on poverty in the 1960s, sociologists helped plan and evaluate programs to reduce the inheritance of poverty.

Sociologists work in nearly every branch of government. For example, sociologists are employed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), where they examine how social relationships are related to the transmission of AIDS, how intravenous drug users share needles, and how AIDS is transmitted along chains of sexual partners. While the physicians and biologists of CDC examine the medical aspects of AIDS, sociologists work at understanding the social aspects.

Working in Business

Sociologists are employed by General Motors and Pillsbury as well as by advertisers and management consultants. Part of their work concerns internal affairs (bureaucratic structures and labor relations), but much of it has to do with market research. Business and industry employ sociologists so that they can use their knowledge of society to predict which way consumer demand is likely to jump. For example, the greater incidence today of single-person households has important implications for life insurance companies, food packagers, and the construction industry. To stay profitable, companies need to be able to predict and plan for such trends. Sociologists are also extensively involved in the preparation of environmental impact statements, in which they try to assess the likely impact of, say, a slurry coal operation on the social and economic fabric of a proposed site.

Working in Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations range from hospitals and clinics to social-activist organizations and private think tanks; sociologists are employed in all of them. Sociologists at Planned Parenthood, for example, are interested in determining the causes and consequences of teenage fertility, evaluating communication strategies that can be used to prevent teenage pregnancy, and devising effective strategies to pursue some of that organization's more controversial goals, such as the preservation of legal access to abortion on demand.

The training that sociologists receive has a strong research orientation and is very different from the therapy-oriented training received by social workers. Nevertheless, a thorough understanding of the ways that social structures impinge on individuals can be useful in helping individuals cope with personal troubles. Consequently, some sociologists also do marriage counseling, family counseling, and rehabilitation counseling.



a global perspective

focus on

SURVEY RESEARCH IN NIGERIA

“How do you feel about the current government?” “Do you think men and women ought to be treated equally?” “How many televisions do you own?” Without much effort, we can imagine places in the world where questions like these that are so commonplace to us would appear foolish and perhaps dangerous to ask.

In the United States and much of the developed world, we are accustomed to questions about the most intimate details of our lives. It is common for bureaucratic agencies to record data pertaining to our height, weight, IQ, taxes, fertility, and credit rating. Our acceptance of intrusive questioning is based on the assumption that this information is somehow necessary to good governance and the trust that our privacy will be protected. Because we are familiar with routine bureaucratic data gathering, it is relatively easy for survey researchers to enlist our cooperation. If called on the telephone, approximately 75 percent of persons in the United States will re-

spond to survey researchers’ inquiries on topics ranging from politics to religion.

When survey research is conducted in Third World nations, many of these conditions do not hold. Often people there have good reason not to trust their governments. More generally, they simply are not accustomed to opening their private lives to the probing of bureaucratic agents.

One of the most common areas, where western survey research methods meet resistance from Third World peoples, is research on fertility and family planning. Agencies such as the United Nations and the U.S. Agency for International Development wish to know how many children women in Kenya, Nigeria, and other high-fertility nations *want* so that they can use the discrepancy between actual and desired child-bearing to develop contraceptive programs. Agnes Riedmann’s (1993) analysis of a survey research project among the Yoruba of Nigeria highlights several cultural clashes that may impede such research efforts.

- In many nonwestern cultures, fertility is “up to God.” It would be unthinkable for individuals to put their own opinions forward. A question such as, “If you had

more money, would you rather have a new car or another child?” presumes that individuals have a choice about fertility and, moreover, that dollar values can be assigned to children.

- Asking *women’s* opinions is often considered indecent (unless one’s husband is present) or at best a waste of time because women’s opinions do not count.
- There is profound distrust of strangers who ask personal questions. After submitting to an ill-understood interview on fertility, for example, one Yoruban respondent asked whether the police were now coming to take her away.

In many cases Yoruban respondents mocked, yelled at, and ran from interviewers. The persistent inquiry of strangers into their private lives seemed to some to be just one more instance of the crazy behavior of “oyinbos,” or white people. Others speculate that it was a result of white people not having enough to do! If badgered into participation, Yorubans politely told interviewers what they thought they wanted to hear and sent them on their way.



Although mothers and mothering are universal, the meanings attached to children and to child-bearing are not. Survey research on fertility and family planning may give seriously misleading results in nations such as Nigeria, where conception is viewed as being “up to God,” not “up to the individual,” and where answering questions about personal topics is considered indecent, if not downright dangerous.

Sociology in the Public Service

Although most sociologists are committed to a value-free approach to their work as scholars, many are equally committed to changing society for the better. They see sociology as a “calling—work that is inseparable from the rest of one’s life and driven by a sense of moral responsibility for people’s welfare (Yamane 1994). As a result, sociologists have served on a wide variety of public commissions and in public offices in order to effect social change. They work for change independently, too. For example, one sociologist, Claire Gilbert, publishes an environmental newsletter, *Blazing Tattles*, that reports adverse effects of pollution (Alesci 1994).

Perhaps the clearest example of sociology in the public service is the award of the 1982 Nobel Peace Prize to Swedish sociologist Alva Myrdal for her unflagging efforts to increase awareness of the dangers of nuclear armaments. Value-free scholarship does not mean value-free citizenship.

Summary

1. Sociology is the systematic study of social behavior. Sociologists use the concepts of role and social structure to analyze common human dramas. Learning to understand how individual behavior is affected by social structures is the process of developing the “sociological imagination.”
2. The rapid social change that followed the industrial revolution was an important inspiration for the development of sociology. Problems caused by rapid social change stimulated the demand for accurate information about social processes. This social-problems orientation remains an important aspect of sociology.
3. Sociology has three major theoretical perspectives: structural-functional theory, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction theory. The three can be seen as alternative lenses through which to view society, with each having value as a tool for understanding how social structures shape human behavior.
4. Structural functionalism has its roots in evolutionary theory. It identifies social structures and analyzes their consequences for social harmony and the maintenance of society. Identification of manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions is part of its analytic framework.
5. Conflict theory developed from Karl Marx’s ideas about the importance of conflict and competition in structuring human behavior. It analyzes social structures by asking who benefits and how are these benefits maintained. It assumes that competition is more important than consensus and that change occurs as a result of conflict and revolution rather than through evolution.
6. Symbolic interaction theory examines the subjective meanings of human interaction and the processes through which people come to develop and communicate shared symbolic meanings. Although structural functionalism and conflict theory study macrosociology, symbolic interactionism is a form of microsociology.
7. Sociology is a social science. This means it relies on critical and systematic examination of the evidence before reaching any conclusions and that it approaches each research question from a position of neutrality. This is called value-free sociology.
8. The four steps in the research process are stating the problem, gathering the data, finding patterns, and generating theory. These steps form a continuous loop, called the “wheel of science.” The movement from data to theory is called induction, and the movement from theory to hypothesis to data is called deduction.
9. A design for gathering data depends on identifying the variables under study, agreeing on precise operational definitions of these variables, and obtaining a representative sample of cases in which to study relationships among the variables.
10. The experiment is a method designed to test cause-and-effect hypotheses. Although it is the best method for this purpose, it has three disadvantages: ethical problems, the guinea-pig effect, and highly artificial conditions. It is most often used for small-group research and for simulation of situations not often found in real life.
11. Survey research is a method that asks a large number of people a set of standard questions. It is good at describing incidence, trends, and differentials for random samples, but it is not as good at describing the contexts of human behavior or for establishing causal relationships.
12. Participant observation is a method in which a small number of individuals who are not randomly chosen are observed or interviewed in depth. The strength of this method is the detail about the contexts of human behavior and its subjective meanings; its weaknesses are poor samples and lack of verification by independent observers.
13. Most sociologists teach and do research in academic settings. A growing minority are employed in government and business, where they do applied research. Regardless of the setting, sociological theory and research have implications for social policy.

Sociology on the Net



As you begin your journey on the Internet, it is important that you are aware of the norms governing Internet behavior. The University of Michigan's Electronic Library has an excellent set of selections on the topic of Internet etiquette.

<http://mel.lib.mi.us/internet/INET-netiquette.html>

Netiquette (Net One). Now open and read the section on the *Internet Revealed: Netiquette*. Browse through the selections and please note the 10 commandments for computer ethics. Please keep these in mind as you do the exercises in this text as well as all of your other computer work.

Now that you are familiar with some of the dos and don'ts of the Internet, it is time to explore some sociological sources that will give you some more insight into the life and times of Karl Marx.

<http://csf.Colorado.EDU/psn/marx/index.html>

Go to the section called *Bio Material* and open the first item entitled the *Marx/Engels Thumbnail Chronology*. Read the chronology and find out how Marx combined scholarship and activism in his own life. How wealthy was Marx and what kind of life did he lead? What were the circumstances of his

death? You may wish to get a more personal feel for Marx and his family by scrolling down to the Marx and Engels Photo Gallery and browsing through the offerings.

FIND IT ON INFOTRAC COLLEGE EDITION

Chapter One includes a section titled "Interchangeable Lenses," in which prostitution is examined using the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology. After reading this section, use InfoTrac College Edition to look up the following article:

"The Division of Household Labor." Beth Anne Shelton and Daphnie John. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1996, v22 p229.

(Hint: Enter the search term *household labor* using the Subject Guide.)

Using the material from the article, construct your own "interchangeable lenses" section in which you examine household labor from the **Marxist/socialist perspective** (a subcategory of conflict theory) and **exchange theory**. Note: Exchange theory is not spelled out in the article as directly as the Marxist/socialist perspective, but you will find ample discussion of it throughout the article.

Suggested Readings

- Babbie, Earl. 1994. *The Sociological Spirit*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth. From a dedicated sociologist who believes that the world and national problems that concern us most have their solutions in the realm addressed by sociology; a book of essays that not only introduces the sociological imagination but also motivates the reader to develop it.
- Berger, Peter L. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor. Thirty years old and a classic. A delightful, well-written introduction to what sociology is and how it differs from other social sciences. Blends a serious exploration of basic sociological understandings with scenes from everyday life—encounters that are easy to relate to and that make sociology both interesting and relevant.
- Deegan, Mary Jo, ed. 1987. *Women in Sociology: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook*. New York: Greenwood Press. Not only a great sourcebook but also arresting reading. A volume that tells about often-forgotten women in sociology from the early nineteenth century until today.
- Mills, C. Wright. (1959). *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press. A penetrating account of how the study of sociology expands understanding of common experiences.
- Neuman, W. Lawrence. (1994). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. A textbook for undergraduates that covers the major research techniques in sociology. Coverage is up-to-date, thorough, and readable.
- Reinharz, Schulamit. (1992). *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press. A well-written review of the relationship between feminist research methods and conventional research design. Richly illustrated with examples from feminist scholarship.

