CHAPTER 1

The Sociological Perspective

SYNOPSIS

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- Sociology and the Other Social Sciences

The Development of Sociology

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- Herbert Spencer
- Karl Marx
- Emile Durkheim
- Max Weber
- Harriet Martineau

The Development of Sociology in America

The Major Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology

- Structural Functional Theory
- Conflict Theory
- Symbolic Interaction Theory
- Exchange Theory
- Evolutionary Theory
- Additional Theoretical Perspectives and the Future of Sociological Theory

1.1 WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

What is **sociology**? Sociology is the scientific study of human behavior, social groups, and society. Sociology is concerned with every aspect of the self in relationships with others and every aspect of the social world that affects a person's thoughts or actions. As stated by the American Sociological Association in a booklet titled *21st Century Careers with an Undergraduate Degree in Sociology* (2009), sociology is the study of *social life* and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. The term *social life* encompasses all interpersonal relationships, all groups or collections of persons, and all types of social organizations. The "causes and consequences of human behavior" encompass how these relationships, groups, and organizations are interrelated; how they influence personal and interpersonal behavior; how they affect and are affected by the larger society;

Sociology
The study of human society and social life and the social causes and consequences of human behavior

Focal Point

THE SOCIOLOGY OF RAMPAGE SHOOTING

Mass killings seem to be occurring more often now than in the past, not only in the United States, but in other countries as well. Rampage shootings—such as those that occurred at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, Virginia Polytechnic University, a movie theatre in Colorado, a youth camp in Norway, and a political gathering at a supermarket in Arizona—have captured the attention of people around the world.

During the weeks and months following these events, newspaper articles abounded with speculations about the possible motives for the shootings and especially about how, in retrospect, the killers had manifested problematic psychological characteristics well before the deadly incidents had taken place.

Much like yourself, the shooting victims probably thought that school, the movies, camp, or an informal meeting with a politician in a shopping center were very safe activities held in places where crime is limited to petty theft and other nonviolent offenses. However, in recent years the media have bombarded us with images of school violence. We hear commentary from multiple news agencies and television personalities suggesting that schools, once thought to be safe havens for children, have become killing fields. Heated political arguments for and against gun control, as means of curtailing violence, result. How much of this is truth and how much is myth? Are young people becoming increasingly violent? Does a proliferation of weapons make societies safer or more dangerous? Should we arm our students with bulletproof vests before sending them

Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter speaks during a demonstration in Philadelphia in August 2013. The event was held in support of legislation HR 1565 to expand background checks for gun sales. (AP Wide World Photo)

how they change or why they remain static; and what the consequences are of these factors. This definition reflects the belief that people can be understood only in the context of their contacts, associations, and communications with other people. The very heart of sociology then—its concern with the complexities and subtleties of human social life—makes it a discipline that is highly relevant, not only to professional sociologists, but also to people in virtually every line of work and at every level.

Thus sociology may consider a wide range of general questions, such as the following:

1. How do groups influence individual human behavior?
2. What are the causes and consequences of a particular system of social order?
3. What social factors contribute to a particular social change?
4. What purpose is served by a particular social organization?
5. What are the causes and consequences of a particular social system?

Other areas investigated by sociologists include racial and ethnic relationships, prejudice and discrimination, power and politics, jobs and income, families and family life, school systems and the educational process, social control, organizations, bureaucracies, groups and group dynamics, leisure, healthcare systems, military systems, women's movements, and labor movements. The stratification of people by wealth, education, power, and such differences as gender or age may also be examined. As

off to school? Are students safer if they attend schools in rural areas rather than in inner cities? After such horrific incidents, and others like them, it is easy to focus exclusively on the characteristics of the killers and/or to blame society for a decline in morality. Some have even suggested that such rampages are the result of severely differing values (political or otherwise) or the availability of guns. These explanations tend to be quick reactions to tragedies that may or may not be accurate or worthwhile explanations.

As sociologists, we feel that to answer questions about why incidents such as these take place, we should first consider what Peter Berger suggests in *Invitation to Sociology*: **"The first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem"** (1963). As a sociology student, you will be asked to examine issues based on a critical analysis, rather than simply relying on the media or your own personal experiences to answer questions related to social phenomena. It is best to examine issues from various points of view, particularly those directly affected by the phenomenon.

> ... the first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem.
>
> Peter Berger

For example, Cybelle Fox and David J. Harding (2005) investigated school shootings from the point of view of **organizational deviance** rather than focusing so much on the characteristics of the killers. "From a sociological perspective, what is perhaps most surprising is that, with few exceptions, school officials were unaware that the shooters in these incidents were experiencing severe emotional, social, and/or behavioral problems or that they had such rage against the institution" (Fox & Harding, 2005, p. 69). Their approach looks not so much at individual killers but at what organizations do or do not do to perpetuate the situation.

Our point here is not that we are shifting the blame from the individual to society. Rather, our point is to reaffirm Berger's contention that "things are not what they seem" and that sociology offers us perspectives, theories, and methods to analyze events in such a way that we go well beyond our immediate reactions and what might seem to be common sense. Then, we can gain a more accurate and helpful understanding of the causes and consequences of events. This does not mean that sociology always finds answers that are different from our initial assumptions (although sometimes the two are very different). Sociology employs, instead, a critical analysis that enables us to feel more confident in explanations and to have explanations, hopefully, that are more useful in helping stem disasters such as rampage shootings.

Organizational deviance
Occurs when events are created by or exist within organizations that do not conform to the organization's goals or expectations and that produce unanticipated and harmful outcomes

you can see, sociology is an extremely broad field. It provides knowledge that directly applies to occupations that involve evaluation, planning, research, analysis, counseling, and problem solving. In its most comprehensive sense, sociology can be regarded as including every aspect of social life—its causes, its forms and structures, its effects, and its changes and transformations.

1.1a The Sociological Imagination

Throughout this course you will likely be asked to "step outside your box" and to view social issues as an outsider. The purpose of this request is to help you develop a **sociological imagination**—a quality of mind that allows us to understand the influence of history and biography on our interactive processes (Mills, 1956). Although published in 1959, Mills' description of what sociological thinking entails is just as accurate today. In other words, our experiences guide our perceptions. A school building may be seen as a place of work by a teacher, as a place of study by a student, as a tax liability by a homeowner, as a fire hazard by a firefighter, and as a particular structural design by a builder. In the same way, sociologists consider the social world from their own unique perspective.

As a student, you will develop not only a sociological imagination but also a sociological perspective. What is the **sociological perspective**? It is a conscious effort

Sociological imagination
The ability to see how history and biography—together—influence our lives

Sociological perspective
A way of looking at society and social behavior that involves questioning the obvious, seeking patterns, and looking beyond the individual in an attempt to discern social processes

to question the obvious and to remove us from familiar experiences, allowing for our critical and objective examination. This sort of *empirical* (based on observation or experiment) investigation enables us to determine whether our generalizations about society are accurate. These investigations could involve asking questions about poverty in a wealthy nation, about the social forces leading to unionization, or about the effects of divorce on family life and on children. Ultimately, it requires us to consider issues such as employment, income, education, gender, age, and race—and how these and other externalities influence people's experiences.

This perspective also entails efforts to see beyond individual experiences. The sociologist tries to interpret patterns—the regular, recurrent aspects of social life. An awareness of interaction patterns and group processes can help us to understand the relationship between our personal experiences and the society in which we live.

Social rules and conventions influence our lives and our actions, including how parents may plan for the arrival of a child whose gender is known beforehand. (Shutterstock)

Human behavior is, to a large extent, shaped by the groups to which people belong, by social interactions, and by the surrounding social and cultural context. Apart from the social and cultural context, for example, it may be extremely difficult to understand the spontaneous, simultaneous, and collective shout that occurs when a person with a wooden stick hits a round object over the head of a person standing on a field and wearing a thick leather glove on one hand but not on the other. It may be difficult to understand the anger of people in a neighborhood when children are bused to a school in a different neighborhood. It may be difficult to understand why people often become overtly vehement in their disagreements about policies concerning taxes, healthcare, gun control, abortion, public prayer, same sex marriages, and other persistent controversial issues. Behaviors such as these are reflections of the group, the institution, and the society in which they occur. Because individual behavior can be understood only in its social and cultural context, the sociological perspective considers the individual as part of the larger society. It notes how the society is reflected in individuals and attempts to discover patterns in behaviors and regularity in events.

The sociological perspective operates at two levels, termed **macrosociology** and **microsociology**. The difference relates to the size of the unit of analysis. Macro-level analysis deals with large-scale structures and processes: broad social categories, institutions, and social systems, such as war, unemployment, and divorce. Solutions to these problems are sought at the structural or organizational level.

Macrosociology
A level of sociological analysis concerned with large-scale structures and processes, such as war and unemployment

Microsociology
The level of sociological analysis concerned with small-scale units such as individuals in small group or social interactions

One example of macrosociological analysis is the study of how societies transition from an agricultural economic system to an industrial one. Micro-level analysis, on the other hand, is concerned with how individuals behave in social situations. The social problems of a veteran, an unemployed worker, or a divorcée would be subjects for microsociological research. Solutions would be sought at the personal or interpersonal level. One example of microsociological analysis is the study of university classroom conformity, where the researcher observes the day-to-day patterns of behavior and socialization occurring among those enrolled in the class. The sociological perspective involves investigations of problems on both scales.

thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

1. It was suggested that human behavior is, to a large extent, shaped through our social interactions and cultural contexts. Discuss ways in which members of our communities influence our everyday choices. More personally, to what extent are you solely responsible for your own condition or destiny? To what extent do you think that people have free will? Think of free will not only in terms of freedom to do what one desires to do but also in terms of how we do what we desire. Do we determine what we desire?
2. In regard to school shootings, how does the sociological imagination help us to understand the events at the recent rampage shootings, such as in the movie theatre in Colorado or the elementary school in Newton, Connecticut?

1.1b Sociology and Popular Wisdom

It is widely assumed, sometimes accurately so, that research findings tend to support what we already know. We all have some idea as to why people act the way they do and how society works. As social beings, most of us were raised in families and communities. Everyone has learned to obey traffic signals and danger signs. We have all heard the debate and rhetoric of presidential and local political campaigns. We have all read newspapers and heard television reports that remind us continually of crime, racial conflicts, poverty, inflation, pollution, AIDS, and teenage pregnancies. We all understand social life—our own experiences make us experts in human behavior and in the nature of society. Let us examine a few examples to prove our point. Aren't the following statements obviously true?

1. People who commit rampage shootings are obviously mentally ill and suddenly snapped before the incident.
2. Because poor racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in larger cities, poverty is more an urban problem than a rural one.
3. Because capital punishment leads people to give serious thought to the consequences before committing crimes, crime rates are much lower in states that have capital punishment than in those that do not.
4. Because males are more prone to violence than females, suicide rates are lower for girls than for boys.
5. Because we all know that death is approaching as we grow older, fear of dying increases with age.

Many other examples could be given, but these common sense ideas should illustrate our point. Although you may agree with all of them, research findings indicate that all of these statements are false. Following are data sources to refute the above false statements:

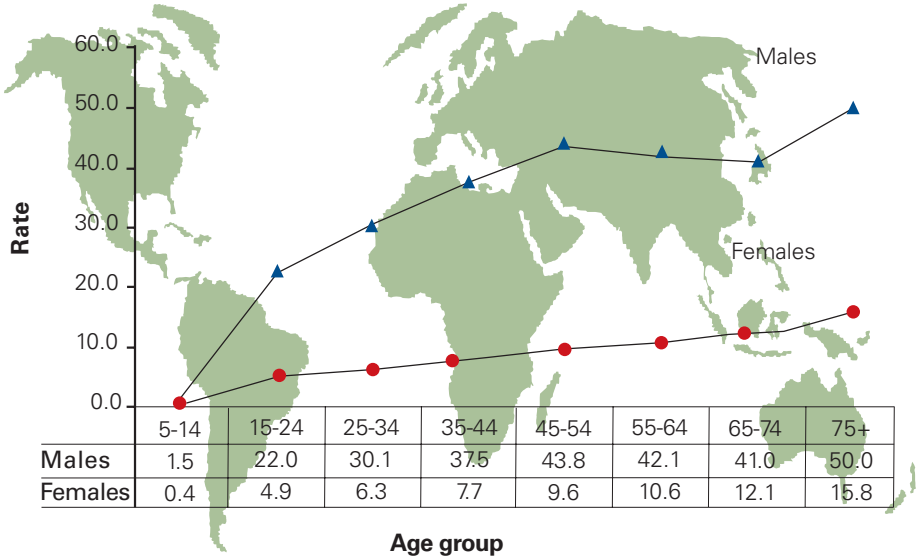
1. Key findings from a 2002 Safe School Initiative study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service found that most perpetrators of school shootings had not previously been evaluated for psychological disorders, nor had they sought assistance from a behavioral agency (Lipton, Savage, & Shane, 2011).

Macro-level analysis is concerned with large-scale structures and processes such as war, unemployment, and divorce. Micro-level analysis is concerned with how individuals, such as the unemployed, behave in social situations. (iStockphoto)

2. Poverty is more prevalent in rural areas than in urban communities. According to Lief Jensen (2006) approximately 7.3 million persons living in rural communities are poor. In 2005, 15.1% of the rural population was living in poverty, compared to 12.5% of persons living in urban communities.
3. The empirical evidence suggests there is very little relationship between the rate of murder and other crimes, and the use of capital punishment. The murder rates in states with the death penalty are not consistently lower than the rates in states without it. In general, the death penalty is *not* a deterrent to murder or other crimes.
4. While suicide rates (Table 1-1 and Figure 1-1) are higher for males than for females in most countries, including the United States, there are some countries where the rates between males and females are strikingly different, some where they are similar, and at least one (China) where they are higher for females (World Health Organization). Sociology prompts us to ask questions: Why are the various trends found in Table 1-1 taking place? What social and cultural factors among different groups have an effect on suicide rates?
5. A *Los Angeles Times* poll (Pinkus, Richardson, & Armet, 2000) found that only 7% of people over age 65 think about and fear death while 20% of 18- to 28-year-olds are afraid of dying.

These examples illustrate that although some popular observations may be true, many others are not supported by empirical data. Without social science research, it is extremely difficult to distinguish what is actually true from what our common sense tells us should be true. Many people have suffered enormous losses in personal relationships and business deals because they acted on the basis of what they considered "common sense" about what they believed was the truth. We believe that the knowledge you gain from sociology will help to improve the quality of your personal and professional life. Even if this is the only sociology course you ever take, we hope that after completing it you will have a far greater understanding of yourself, of your society, and of human behavior—as well as an increased ability to question many of the popular observations

Figure 1-1 Distribution of Suicide Rates per 100,000 by Gender and Age, 2000



	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Males	1.5	22.0	30.1	37.5	43.8	42.1	41.0	50.0
Females	0.4	4.9	6.3	7.7	9.6	10.6	12.1	15.8

Age group

Adapted from "Distribution of Suicides Rates (per 100,000) by Gender and Age, 2000," World Health Organization. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicide_rates_chart/en/, on March 06, 2013.

Table 1-1 Suicide Rates per 100,000 by Country, Year, and Sex

Most recent year available; as of 2011

Country	Year	Males	Females	Country	Year	Males	Females
Albania	03	4.7	3.3	Kuwait	09	1.9	1.7
Antigua and Barbuda	95	0.0	0.0	Kyrgyzstan	09	14.1	3.6
Argentina	08	12.6	3.0	Latvia	09	40.0	8.2
Armenia	08	2.8	1.1	Lithuania	09	61.3	10.4
Australia	06	12.8	3.6	Luxembourg	08	16.1	3.2
Austria	09	23.8	7.1	Maldives	05	0.7	0.0
Azerbaijan	07	1.0	0.3	Malta	08	5.9	1.0
Bahamas	05	1.9	0.6	Mauritius	08	11.8	1.9
Bahrain	06	4.0	3.5	Mexico	08	7.0	1.5
Barbados	06	7.3	0.3	Netherlands	09	13.1	5.5
Belarus	07	48.7	8.8	New Zealand	07	18.1	5.5
Belgium	05	28.8	10.3	Nicaragua	06	9.0	2.6
Belize	08	6.6	0.7	Norway	09	17.3	6.5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	91	20.3	3.3	Panama	08	9.0	1.9
Brazil	08	7.7	2.0	Paraguay	08	5.1	2.0
Bulgaria	08	18.8	6.2	Peru	07	1.9	1.0
Canada	04	17.3	5.4	Philippines	93	2.5	1.7
Chile	07	18.2	4.2	Poland	08	26.4	4.1
China (selected rural & urban areas)	99	13.0	14.8	Portugal	09	15.6	4.0
China (Hong Kong SAR)	09	19.0	10.7	Puerto Rico	05	13.2	2.0
Colombia	07	7.9	2.0	Republic of Korea	09	39.9	22.1
Costa Rica	09	10.2	1.9	Republic of Moldova	08	30.1	5.6
Croatia	09	28.9	7.5	Romania	09	21.0	3.5
Cuba	08	19.0	5.5	Russian Federation	06	53.9	9.5
Cyprus	08	7.4	1.7	Saint Kitts and Nevis	95	0.0	0.0
Czech Republic	09	23.9	4.4	Saint Lucia	05	4.9	0.0
Denmark	06	17.5	6.4	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	08	5.4	1.9
Dominican Republic	05	3.9	0.7	Sao Tome and Principe	87	0.0	1.8
Ecuador	09	10.5	3.6	Serbia	09	28.1	10.0
Egypt	09	0.1	0.0	Seychelles	08	8.9	0.0
El Salvador	08	12.9	3.6	Singapore	06	12.9	7.7
Estonia	08	30.6	7.3	Slovakia	05	22.3	3.4
Finland	09	29.0	10.0	Slovenia	09	34.6	9.4
France	07	24.7	8.5	South Africa	07	1.4	0.4
Georgia	09	7.1	1.7	Spain	08	11.9	3.4
Germany	06	17.9	6.0	Sri Lanka	91	44.6	16.8
Greece	09	6.0	1.0	Suriname	05	23.9	4.8
Grenada	08	0.0	0.0	Sweden	08	18.7	6.8
Guatemala	08	5.6	1.7	Switzerland	07	24.8	11.4
Guyana	06	39.0	13.4	Syrian Arab Republic	85	0.2	0.0
Haiti	03	0.0	0.0	Tajikistan	01	2.9	2.3
Honduras	78	0.0	0.0	Thailand	02	12.0	3.8
Hungary	09	40.0	10.6	TFYR Macedonia	03	9.5	4.0
Iceland	08	16.5	7.0	Trinidad and Tobago	06	17.9	3.8
India	09	13.0	7.8	Turkmenistan	98	13.8	3.5
Iran	91	0.3	0.1	Ukraine	09	37.8	7.0
Ireland	09	19.0	4.7	United Kingdom	09	10.9	3.0
Israel	07	7.0	1.5	United States of America	05	17.7	4.5
Italy	07	10.0	2.8	Uruguay	04	26.0	6.3
Jamaica	90	0.3	0.0	Uzbekistan	05	7.0	2.3
Japan	09	36.2	13.2	Venezuela	07	5.3	1.2
Jordan	08	0.2	0.0	Zimbabwe	90	10.6	5.2
Kazakhstan	08	43.0	9.4				

Adapted from "Suicide Rates per 100,000 by Country, Year and Sex (Table)," World Health Organization, 2002. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide_rates/en/, on March 06, 2013.

widely accepted as truth by the press and by our fellow citizens. In addition, part of what is needed to develop your sociological perspective and to comprehend "the truth" is the realization that we live in a global world and we are but one part of the big picture. Media stereotypes often lead to misconceptions about other cultures or social issues within and outside our society.

1.1c Sociology and the Other Social Sciences

All branches of science attempt to discover general truths, propositions, or laws through methods based on observation and experimentation. Science is often divided into two categories: the social sciences and what are often referred to as the natural sciences. The natural sciences include (a) the *biological sciences*: biology, eugenics, botany, bacteriology, and so forth, which deal with living organisms, both human and nonhuman; and (b) the *physical sciences*: physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, and so on, which deal with the nonliving physical world. The word "natural" must be applied to these sciences with caution, however. The topics covered by the **social sciences** are just as natural as those that the natural sciences embrace. Sociology, like other social sciences, applies the scientific method to studying human behavior. For example, the organization of cities, the collective action of a football team, and the patterns of interaction in a family system are just as natural as electricity, magnetism, and the behavior of insects and can be studied using a scientific approach.

Sociology is a social science, but it is important to realize that a complete understanding of a society or of social relationships would be impossible without an understanding of the physical world in which societies exist and an understanding of the biological factors that affect humans. Like the other social sciences—psychology, anthropology, economics, and political science—sociology deals with human relationships, social systems, and societies. Although the boundaries among the various social sciences are sometimes hazy, each tends to focus on a particular aspect of the world and tries to understand it.

Social science
A science that has human behavior, social organizations, and society as its subject matter

Anthropology
The study of the physical, biological, social, and cultural development of humans, often on a comparative basis

Traditional indigenous
Refers to ethnic groups who are native to a land or region

Economics
The study of how goods, services, and wealth are produced, consumed, and distributed

Political science
The study of power, government, and political processes

Psychology
The study of human mental processes and individual human behavior

Social psychology
The study of how individuals interact with other individuals or groups and how groups influence the individual

Anthropology is, probably, the social science that has the most in common with sociology. Anthropology is a broad and varied discipline that includes physical anthropology, archaeology, cultural history, social linguistics, and social and cultural anthropology. *Physical anthropologists* attempt to understand both **traditional indigenous** and modern cultures by studying physical traits, such as the shape and size of skulls; artifacts, such as pottery and weapons; and genetic mutations of both human and nonhuman forms of life. The work of *cultural* or *social anthropologists*, on the other hand, is very similar to that of sociologists. Like sociologists, they are concerned with social systems and institutions, patterns of organization, and other aspects of society.

Economics is the study of how goods, services, and wealth are produced, consumed, and distributed within societies. **Political science** is the study of power, governments, and political processes. **Psychology** is concerned primarily with human mental processes and individual human behavior. Frequent areas of study include learning, human development, behavior disorders, perception, emotion, motivation, creativity, personality, and a wide range of other mental and behavioral processes. In addition to being studied by psychologists, some of these areas are also studied by sociologists and by members of a field known as **social psychology**.

Sociology applies the scientific method to studying human behavior, such as the collective action of a football team. (iStockphoto)

History is considered either a social science or one of the humanities and provides a chronological record and analysis of past events. **Geography**, often considered a natural science, is concerned with the physical environment and the distribution of plants and animals, including humans. The *physical geographer* investigates climate, agriculture, the distribution of plant species, and oceanography. *Social* and *cultural geographers*, like sociologists, may be interested in how the distribution of people in a particular area influences social relationships. Sometimes, *urban geographers* and *urban sociologists* work together on such problems as how various types of housing affect family life and how a given transportation system affects employment and productivity. Although physical geography usually is not considered a social science, social geography clearly shares many areas of interest with the other social sciences.

1.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

The study of sociology is a recent development in social history. Philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato had much to say about society and human relationships—but it wasn't until the late nineteenth century that a writer that we know of could appropriately be considered a sociologist. In fact, the label *sociologist* was not even applied to the early practitioners of the field in their own time—they have been identified as such only in retrospect.

Most early writers were interdisciplinary in orientation, drawing their ideas from philosophy, as well as from the physical and biological sciences. Actually, as a result of developments in the natural sciences, much of the early writing in sociology was based on the assumption that laws of human behavior could be discovered in the same way that laws of nature had been discovered by astronomers, physicists, and other natural scientists. These early writers also had great faith in the power of reason, assuming that it could be used to formulate laws that could be applied to improve social life and to eliminate or diminish social problems.

These assumptions were rapidly put to a test as the Industrial Revolution in Europe presented new challenges and social problems. People began to migrate to towns and cities for factory jobs. With many of these jobs came low wages, long working hours, harsh child labor practices, housing and sanitation problems, social alienation, social conflict, encounters with crime, and a variety of other social problems that provided an abundance of conditions for concern, study, and solution. The Industrial Revolution that began in England, the social revolution in France under Napoleon, and the political upheavals throughout Europe—all provide the backdrop for the emergence of the discipline known today as sociology. Thus, sociology originally developed as a practical discipline intended to address social problems (Turner & Turner, 1990).

The discipline of sociology as we know it today emerged from the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. With the Industrial Revolution, people began migrating to towns and cities for factory jobs, which brought about such social problems as harsh child labor practices. *(Library of Congress)*

We can begin to understand this discipline by briefly examining a few of the early writers who were influential in its development. Certainly, these are not the only important European thinkers who helped shape sociology; however, their work was seminal in shaping the foundations of the discipline.

History
The study of the past; social history is concerned with past human social events.

Geography
The study of the physical environment and the distribution of plants and animals, including humans

1.2a Auguste Comte

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was born in southern France. He was educated in Paris where his studies were concentrated in mathematics and the natural sciences. Comte is usually

credited with being the "father of sociology" because he coined the term *sociology.* He first called this new social science "social physics" because he believed that society must be studied in the same scientific manner as the world of the natural sciences. Comte said that sociology, like the natural sciences, would use empirical methods to discover basic laws of society, which would benefit humankind by playing a major part in the improvement of the human condition.

(Wikimedia Commons)

Comte is best known for his **law of human progress** (or law of the three stages), which basically states that society has gone through three stages: (1) the theological or fictitious, (2) the metaphysical or abstract, and (3) the scientific or positivist. In addition, a specific type of social organization and political dominance accompanies each mental age of humankind. In the first stage, the theological, everything is explained and understood through the supernatural. The family is the prototypical social unit (the model or standard to which others conform); priests and military personnel hold political dominance. In the second stage, the metaphysical, abstract forces are assumed to be the source of explanation and understanding. The state replaces the family as the prototypical social unit; and as in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the political dominance is held by the clergy and lawyers. In the third and highest stage, the scientific laws of the universe are studied through observation, experimentation, and comparison. The whole human race replaces the state as the operative social unit, and industrial administrators and scientific moral guides hold the political dominance. It was Comte's assertion that the scientific stage of human knowledge and intellectual development was just beginning in his day. According to Comte, sociology, like the natural sciences, could henceforth draw on the methods of science to explain and understand the laws of progress and the social order.

A related concept originated by Comte was the view that society was a type of "organism." Like plants and animals, society had a structure consisting of many interrelated parts; and it evolved from simpler to more complex forms. Using this organic model as a base, he reasoned that sociology should focus on **social statics**, the structure of the organism, and on **social dynamics**, the organism's processes and forms of change. Comte believed that sociology was the means by which a more just and rational social order could be achieved.

Comte was primarily interested in applying scientific principles of social life to affect social situations. That social actions are governed by laws and principles—just as physical actions are—is a significant fact that is useful to others besides academic social scientists. Whether in our personal lives or in our occupations, if we believe that individual personalities alone or fate alone can explain why problems occur, we might look in the wrong places for solutions or become powerless to solve them. In a discussion about Comte's ideas, social theorist Lewis Coser (1977) states, "As long as [people] believed that social actions followed no law and were, in fact, arbitrary and fortuitous, they could take no concerted action to ameliorate them."

Law of human progress
Comte's notion that society has gone through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific

Social statics
Comte's term for the stable structure of a society

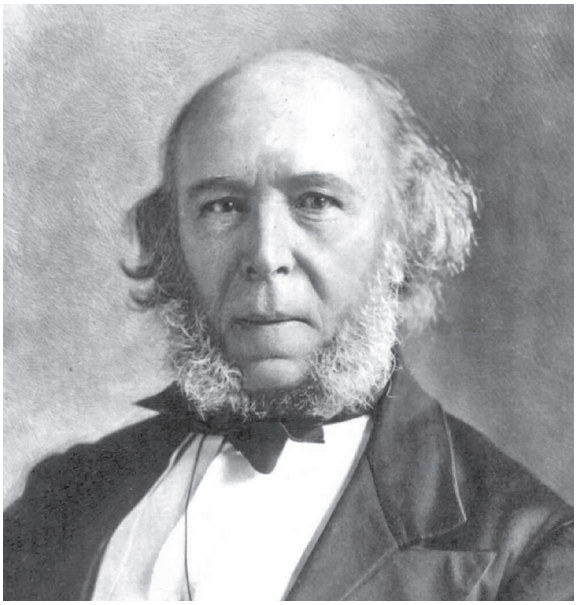
Social dynamics
Comte's term for social processes and forms of change

Although Comte wrote primarily for the intellectual social leaders of his day, his ideas were useful to many people. His belief that society should be studied scientifically is the basis for all sociological research. Sociologists do not merely speculate, philosophize, or use opinions to formulate theories about social behavior; rather, they rely heavily on the scientific principles emphasized by Comte: observation, experimentation, and comparison. To explain the rate and/or causes of school shootings in the United States, for example, a sociologist might first formulate hypotheses to test. Perhaps the researcher believes the cause of school shootings is directly related to the learning behaviors of the shooter, who learned violent behavior from an abnormal or dysfunctional home life. The sociologist

might then collect data that would enable him or her to compare the characteristics of school shooters: familial history, childhood behavioral problems, discipline style used by parents, etc.

1.2b Herbert Spencer

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was born in England and received, as did Comte, considerable training in mathematics and the natural sciences. One of Spencer's major concerns was with the evolutionary nature of changes in social structure and social institutions. He believed that human societies pass through an evolutionary process similar to the process Darwin explained in his theory of natural selection. It was Spencer who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest"—and he was the first to believe that human societies evolved according to the principles of natural laws. Just as natural selection favors particular organisms and permits them to survive and multiply, those societies that have adapted to their surroundings and can compete are the ones to survive. Those that have not adapted and cannot compete will encounter difficulties and will, eventually, die.



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Spencer's theory paralleled Darwin's theory of biological evolution in other ways. He believed that societies evolved from relative homogeneity and simplicity to heterogeneity and complexity. As simple societies progress, they become increasingly complex and differentiated. Spencer viewed societies not simply as collections of individuals but as organisms with a life and vitality of their own.

In sharp contrast to Comte, the idea of survival of the fittest led Spencer to argue for a policy of noninterference in human affairs and society. He opposed legislation designed to solve social problems, believing it would interfere with the natural selection process. He also opposed free public education, assuming that those who really wanted to learn would find the means. Just as societies that could not adapt would die out, Spencer contended, individuals who could not fit in did not deserve to flourish.

As you can imagine, Spencer's ideas had the support of people of wealth and power. His theories strengthened the position of those who wanted to keep the majority of the population impoverished and minimally educated. His ideas also tended to support a discriminatory policy: Was it not a natural evolutionary law that kept people unequal? Spencer thought that conflict and change were necessary parts of the evolutionary process (like Marx, as discussed in the next section). Unlike Marx, however, he believed that planned change would disrupt the orderly evolution of society, which he thought would eventually improve the social order. (His goals are a radical departure from those of Marx in other respects, too, of course.)

Those familiar with contemporary politics in the United States will recognize a resurgence of ideas similar to those espoused by Spencer. How could a politician, a political science major, or a citizen gain insight for interpreting some policies implemented under some conservative political administrations? For example, Ronald Reagan, who became president of the United States in 1980 and who died in 2004, will be remembered largely for the dictum of "getting government off the backs of the people." This dictum was manifested in policies that led to lower taxes, less government regulation of environmental pollution, cutbacks in federal aid for college loans and to colleges in general, reduction in aid for social service programs, and deregulation of many industries. Americans were told that the rationale for such noninterference was to give people more freedom; this would, theoretically, stimulate the economy. This policy was reinforced again under the administration of George W. Bush and became a central value among many conservative politicians, especially within the Tea Party. The year 2011

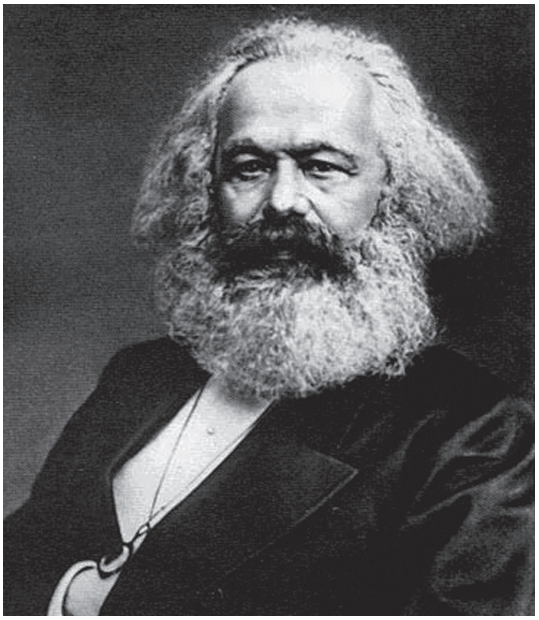
was the centennial of Ronald Reagan's birth, and many of the ceremonies that honored his life also paid homage to his views on government non-interference. As an aside, it is interesting to note that unemployment rates in the mid-1980s (when Reagan gained support for his views about "non-government interference") peaked at 10.8% and then declined to around 3.8% by 2000 (U.S. Misery Index, 2010). At the end of 2009, the unemployment rates had again climbed to 10.1% and were still at around 8% just prior to the 2012 presidential election. This is around the time that the Tea Party began to gain strength and become a noticeable political force. Is this coincidental, or does this suggest that there is a connection between social theory, political views, and economic conditions? If so, why do you think a Spencerian philosophy of government noninterference becomes more popular during periods of high-unemployment?

The Tea Party, a powerful political force in the 2012 presidential election, espoused views of less government, which can be linked to Spencer's ideas about noninterference in social problems. (AP Wide World Photo)

Today few sociologists accept his ultraconservative theory of noninterference in social change. There is, however, widespread acceptance of the idea that societies grow progressively more complex as they evolve; and an increasing recognition that evolutionary processes seem to operate in certain areas, such as population change or the selection by the stratification system of the "socially most fit" for particular types of education and positions.

1.2c Karl Marx

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was born in Germany. As a young man, he moved to Paris and met the leading intellectuals of the radical movements of Europe, solidifying his conversion to socialism. During this time he also began his lifelong friendship with Friedrich Engels, with whom he wrote the now-famous *Communist Manifesto* (1969, originally published in 1847).



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The theme common to all the writings of Marx and Engels was a profound sense of moral outrage at the misery produced in the lower classes by the new industrial social order. Marx concluded that political revolution was a vital necessity in the evolutionary process of society and that it was the only means by which the improvement of social conditions could be achieved.

Marx was a major social theorist and contributor to economic and philosophical thought. He believed that economics was the dominant institution in the shaping of a society. He argued that **social conflict**—struggle and strife—was at the core of society and the source of all social change. He asserted that all history was marked by **economic determinism**—the idea that all change, social conditions, and even society itself are based on economic factors—and that economic inequality results in class struggles. Marx believed society was comprised largely of two social classes: **bourgeoisie** (the owners and rulers) and the **proletariat** (the industrial

Social conflict
A view of Karl Marx that social conflict—class struggle due to economic inequality—is at the core of society and is the key source of social change

Economic determinism
The idea that economic factors are responsible for most social change and for the nature of social conditions, activities, and institutions

Bourgeoisie
The class of people who own the means of production

Proletariat
The group in capitalist societies that does not own the means of production and has only labor to sell

sociologyatwork

Helping Migrant Farm Workers

Sandy Smith-Nonini is a former journalist, turned anthropologist. She earned her PhD in anthropology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Smith-Nonini's work is an example of how Marx's theories can be used to explain the origins of inequities in the workplace.

Smith-Nonini has been studying migrant farmworkers and meat packers in North Carolina and working with advocacy groups defending their labor rights. These workplaces, which now depend heavily on immigrants, have unusually high rates of injuries and even deaths. Yet many citizens have little knowledge of new immigrants, much less of the working conditions within companies that stock the counters of our grocery stores. For this reason, Smith-Nonini has worked with a Unitarian-Universalist committee on a documentary project on farmworker conditions. The goal of her research and documentary is to raise awareness among the general public and among the farmworkers themselves, many of whom are not aware they have rights to fair labor conditions.

In 2004, when President Bush proposed a new legal status for immigrant workers, Smith-Nonini noted that many hoped for an end to the administration's "close the border" mentality. However, when she looked closer at the new proposals, Smith-Nonini became concerned. Under the plan, Mexican workers would be granted temporary visas to work in a specific job for an employer who participates in a "guest worker" program. The visas would be for 3-year periods and could be renewed with the same employer. Having studied the existing federal guest worker program, known as H2A, Smith-Nonini realized the new proposal was likely to replicate some of the worst abuses now affecting H2A workers.

In a news article criticizing the Bush plan, she noted the problems "derive from the fact that the employer is also the de facto immigration officer, with the power to deport those who grumble about work conditions or pay." From a Marxian perspective, the employers are clearly the owners of the means of production and able to create working conditions that the farmworkers have no choice but to accept.

"For example," Smith-Nonini states, "farmworkers employed by the North Carolina Growers Association (NCGA), the largest H2A farm labor brokerage in the country, routinely complain that workers who leave their assigned farm or who anger their farmer employer end up on a blacklist maintained by the NCGA." These workers, then, are not rehired. Smith-Nonini continues, "Abuses such as the blacklist, long contract period, and the inability of workers to change employers are possible only in a dual-labor market of the kind that is created by guest worker programs where a class of workers lacks full citizenship and labor rights. If employers had to compete in the general market for workers, they would be forced to improve conditions to attract workers."

Migrant workers play a role in strengthening the economy in many areas of the United States. One study, at North Carolina State University, estimated that each farmworker's labor contributed $12,000 to the state's agricultural profits. Smith-Nonini's research and advocacy raise the question of whether it's fair for the larger community to benefit so handsomely from this cheap labor while the workers themselves are not reaping a fair share of the rewards and are often suffering grave injustices in the process.

(AP Wide World Photo)

workers of his day). These conflicts between the rich and the poor, the owners and the workers (also referred to as the haves and have-nots), lead to feelings of *alienation*, a feeling among the workers of frustration and disconnection from work and life. The recognition among workers that society is stratified and that they share the same plight is known as **class-consciousness**, which according to Marx leads ultimately to revolution. It was Marx's belief that conflict, revolution, and the overthrow of capitalism were inevitable.

Karl Marx's ideas are used in practically every area of sociology. To simplify one of Marx's tenets, there is a fundamental inequality in social relationships between those who have assets (land, money, jobs, equipment, prestige, etc.) that provide them with power and those who do not. This inequality allows those who have power to dominate and exploit those who do not. Thus, all social relationships contain the elements of conflict between "haves" and "have-nots."

Many sociologists use this idea as a premise for interpreting a variety of social relationships regarding gender and race relations, marriage, economics, politics, employment, education, religion, justice, and other matters. In developing a theory about school shootings, for example, a Marxian analyst may focus on the conflict between students who feel powerless and those who seem to be in control (teachers, principals, and other, more popular students). In trying to explain education, the focus might be on the inherent conflict between faculty (the ones who control the grades) and students, or administration (the ones who control jobs and salaries) and faculty.

Today, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with Marx's ideas, few sociologists deny the importance of the contributions he made. Sociologists are still trying to understand the influence of economic determinism, social conflict, social structure, and social class.

1.2d Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) can be considered the first French academic sociologist. In 1892, the University of Paris granted him its first doctorate in sociology. Six years later he was appointed chair of the first Department of Social Sciences at the University of Bordeaux and later was named chair of the Department of Education and Sociology, thus providing sociology the opportunity to be recognized as a science. In addition to teaching, Durkheim wrote critical reviews and published important papers and books. His best known books include *The Division of Labor in Society*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, *Suicide*, and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

Durkheim is responsible for several important ideas. For one, he refused to explain social events by assuming that they operated according to the same rules as biology or psychology. To Durkheim, social phenomena are **social facts** that have distinctive social characteristics and determinants. He defined social facts as "every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint" (1893, p. 13). Since these facts are external to the individual, they outlive individuals and endure over time. They include such things as customs, laws, and the general rules of behavior that people accept without question. Stopping at traffic lights, wearing shirts, and combing one's hair are behaviors most people perform without dissent. In short, individuals are more the products of society than the creators of it.

Class-consciousness
Awareness among members of a society that the society is stratified

Social facts
Reliable and valid pieces of information about society

Collective conscience
A collective psyche that results from the blending of many individual mentalities, but exists above any one individual

Although an individual can come to know and be a part of society, society itself is external to the individual. For this reason, Durkheim concentrated on examining characteristics of groups and structures rather than individual attributes. Instead of looking at the personal traits of religious believers, for example, he focused on the cohesion or lack of cohesion of specific religious groups. He was not so concerned with the religious experience of individuals, but rather with the communal activity and the communal bonds that develop from religious participation (Coser, 1977).

Such communal interaction gives rise to what Durkheim called a **collective conscience**—a common psyche (spirit), which results from the blending together of

many individual mentalities yet that exists over and above any individual. Although the collective conscience is socially created, it is a powerful reality that comes to control us and cannot be denied. From this perspective, for example, whether God exists as a supernatural being is secondary to the fact that God exists as a result of people sharing and demonstrating their belief in God. To those sharing that belief, God is unquestionably and undeniably real, and thus an inescapable force. It is no longer a matter of a personal belief, but is now a social belief that becomes a force outside of any one of us.

Durkheim's work *Suicide* (1951) deserves special attention for several reasons. It established a unique model for social research; and it clearly demonstrated that human behavior, although it might seem very individual, could be understood only by investigating the social context in which the behavior took place. After looking at numerous statistics on different countries and different groups of people, Durkheim concluded that suicide was a social phenomenon, related to the individual's involvement in group life and the extent to which he or she was part of some cohesive social unit. Durkheim's central thesis was that the more a person is integrated into intimate social groups, the less likely he or she is to commit suicide. Durkheim used his thesis about integration into society to develop four explanations of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic (Durkheim, 1951). One of Durkheim's main points is that unlike popular (and common sense) explanations that explain suicide primarily as a personal act and a result of psychological conditions, he explains suicide in terms of peoples' connections to (or integration with) society and social groups and how organized or disorganized social conditions are. **Egoistic suicide** is a result of not being sufficiently integrated into society or meaningful social groups. When this occurs, one does not have strong social ties. Thus, an individual is left not only feeling alone but also without the bonds that could help him or her through a troubled period. For example, men and unmarried people have higher suicide rates than women and married people. **Altruistic suicide** is the opposite. This is when a person is overly connected to society or a social group to the extent that the group takes on more meaning than that person's personal life, and he or she lives for the group. The terrorists who were responsible for the 9/11 jet crashes into the World Trade Center in New York were on a suicide mission. Their fundamentalist religious convictions and their adherence to the values of al Qaeda were largely responsible for their involvement in these missions. The difference between egoistic and altruistic suicide is easy to remember if you simply think of the words. Egoism means a focus on the self. Without sufficient ties to society or social groups, this type of suicide is more likely to occur. Altruism means a concern for others. This may be more likely to occur when one is connected to groups that are strongly present in one's life.

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According to Durkheim, a third type of suicide, **anomic suicide**, occurs when an individual is faced with sudden social disorganization or a disruption in the social conditions that guide the individual's life. With such sudden changes, the values, goals, and rules for living (or norms) may suddenly lose their meaning, thus leaving the individual without guidance or patterns or regulations, and feeling alienated from life. He called this condition "anomie." While this may appear to be a psychological state, it is important to understand that "anomie" or "normlessness" is the result in the disruption of social patterns, thus leaving an individual disconnected from social regulations that guide his or her life. A sudden downturn in the economy (or a stock market crash) that results in a once wealthy individual becoming relatively impoverished (or, at least, losing the identity and lifestyle associated with extreme wealth) or the sudden loss of a spouse or domestic partner after 30 years of living together could result in a sudden lack of a compass to guide one's life—and thus to anomic suicide. The regulations that guided one's life suddenly become meaningless.

Finally, **fatalistic suicide** may occur when a person is faced with oppressive social conditions with such a high degree of regulation over his or her life that the person feels

Egoistic suicide
Suicide that results from lack of social integration into meaningful groups, leaving the individual with a sense of being isolated

Altruistic suicide
Suicide that results from being overly integrated into groups and the group meaning taking on more importance than the individual

Anomic suicide
Suicide that results from sudden changes in society or in one's life, leading to a disruption in the patterns that guide one's life

Fatalistic suicide
Suicide that results from oppressive social conditions that lead one to a fatal sense of hopelessness

Emile Durkheim believed religion to be an important element in the system of beliefs through which social integration was achieved. The ceremonies and symbols associated with religion became common and shared experiences and were, thus, a part of the collective conscience. (AP Wide World Photo)

there is no hope or possibility of pursuing their personal interests. Because of certain social conditions—for example, a society that fosters slavery—individuals may feel that they have been condemned to their fates, and thus be more inclined to suicide.

Durkheim believed that social integration was achieved through people's mutual dependence on, and acceptance of, a system of common beliefs. An important element in the system of beliefs was religion, the ceremonies of which become common experiences—symbols shared by the association of a group of people—and thus a significant part of the collective conscience.

Durkheim played a key role in the founding of sociology. Although Comte, Spencer, and Marx introduced new ideas about society and helped convince the public that sociology and the other social sciences deserved a hearing, it was Durkheim who made sociology a legitimate academic enterprise.

1.2e Max Weber

Max Weber (1864–1920; pronounced *Vay-ber*) was born in Germany. He was trained in law and economics, receiving his doctorate from the University of Heidelberg at age 25. His best-known works in sociology include *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, and *Methodology of the Social Sciences*.

Weber's mixed feelings toward authority, whether familial or political, are reflected in his writings on the topic of power and authority. Weber discussed why men claim authority and expect their wishes to be obeyed. (Typically during his period, women were not considered.) His approach to sociology, however, has probably been as influential as his ideas. His predecessors considered societies in terms of their large social structures, social divisions, and social movements. Spencer based his studies on the belief that societies evolved like organisms; Marx considered society in terms of class conflicts; and Durkheim was concerned with the institutional arrangements that maintain the cohesion of social structures. These theorists assumed that society, although composed of individuals, existed apart from them.

Weber was concerned with value-free sociology. He did not believe that society could be studied value-free because sociologists would always interject their own values and beliefs when studying society or even when choosing what to study. Weber believed that sociologists must study not just social facts and social structures but also *social actions*—external objective behaviors as well as the internalized values, motives, and subjective meanings that individuals attach to their own behavior and to the behavior of others. The goal, Weber believed, was to achieve a "sympathetic understanding" of the minds of others. He called this approach **verstehen** (pronounced "*ver-shtay-en*"): understanding human action by examining the subjective meanings that people attach to their own behavior and to the behavior of others. Once values, motives, and intentions were identified, Weber contended, sociologists could treat them objectively and scientifically. Weber's concept of "verstehen" is a vital tool for academic and applied social researchers. As mentioned, Weber explained social class not just in terms of how much power, wealth, and prestige people have but also in terms of how they see and feel about their power, wealth, and prestige. So, for example, in conducting research on inequality between upper-class and middle-class groups, academic researchers need to find out not only what differences exist due to power and wealth but also how people in each group feel about their own self-worth and the worth of others.

(Wikimedia Commons)

This approach is evident in Weber's interpretation of social class. Whereas Marx saw class as rooted in economic determinism, particularly as related to property ownership, Weber argued that social class involves subjective perceptions of power, wealth, ownership, and social prestige, as well as the objective aspects of these factors.

1.2f Harriet Martineau

Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) was a significant contributor to the early development of sociology. Almost completely deaf by adulthood, Martineau immersed herself in reading and self-education. She studied social life in Great Britain and traveled, in 1834, to the United States to examine American social life for 2 years. She published her findings in *Society in America* in 1837 and in *Retrospect of Western Travel* in 1838. Due to her gender, much of her original research was ignored by the male dominated discipline. However, she was acknowledged for translating Comte's work, *Positive Philosophy*, into English in 1851, condensing his six-volume work into two volumes. Today, Martineau is recognized for her contributions to sociology and is considered to be one of the earliest founders of sociological thought and research.

(Wikimedia Commons)

Besides the scholars just discussed, other European thinkers—including Georg Simmel, Henri de Saint-Simon, Vilfredo Pareto, Ferdinand Toennies, and Karl Mannheim—contributed to the development of sociology. With rare exceptions, they viewed society as a social unit that transcended the individual or was greater than the sum of individuals. It was for this reason, in part, that they did not investigate the means by which individual humans come to accept and reflect the fundamental conditions and structures of their societies—a question that was an important concern of some early American sociologists.

Verstehen

Understanding human action by examining the subjective meanings that people attach to their own behavior and the behavior of others

1.3 THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY IN AMERICA

The earliest sociologists were Europeans, but much of the development of sociology took place in the United States. The first department of sociology was established in 1893 at the University of Chicago, and many important early figures of the discipline were associated with that institution. At the time sociology was developing, rapid social change was occurring within America. Industrialization, urbanization, and immigration were three factors contributing to this change as the economy was shifting from agricultural to industrial. As people began to migrate to the cities, the increase in population created tremendous social problems including overcrowding, pollution, and crime, as well as many others. In addition, massive waves of immigrants were arriving in the United States which only intensified the problems, as their cultures often clashed with those of other immigrants and Americans. By the beginning of the twentieth century, communities were looking toward universities to find the answers to problems within the cities. Much like their European forerunners, American sociologists were concerned with social problems and social reform, in part because of the rapid social changes taking place in this country. Some of these early scholars (such as Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Albion Small, Jane Addams, and W. E. B. DuBois) focused on urbanization and urban problems—ghettos, prostitution, drug addiction, juvenile delinquency, immigration, and race relations. Others—such as George Herbert Mead, W. I. Thomas and Charles Horton Cooley—helped lay the foundations for the understanding of social interaction.

In the 1940s, the center of sociological research shifted from Chicago to other schools such as Harvard and Columbia. Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), who was affiliated with Harvard, rapidly became the leading social theorist in America, if not the world. Drawing heavily on the work of European thinkers such as Weber and Durkheim, he developed a very broad "general theory of action" (Parson & Shils, 1951).

Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), a student of Parsons, began his teaching career at Harvard but moved in 1941 to Columbia University. Although his general orientation was similar to Parsons', Merton was much less abstract and much more concerned with linking general theory to empirical testing. This approach came to be known as the **middle-range theory**. His contributions to our understanding of such concepts as social structures, self-fulfilling prophecies, deviance, and bureaucracies place him among the leading American social theorists. C. Wright Mills, Peter Blau, Erving Goffman, Herbert Blumer, Ralf Dahrendorf, Randall Collins, and Jessie Bernard were other scholars who greatly contributed to sociology's development in reaching its present state. Much new work on the elderly, gender roles, popular culture, globalization, and peace studies is being undertaken. In addition, the methodological tools and procedures and the range of theories to explain social phenomena are more diverse today than ever before.

1.4 THE MAJOR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY

Middle-range theory
A set of propositions designed to link abstract theory with empirical testing

Theory
A set of logically and systematically interrelated propositions that explain a particular process or phenomenon

Theories are explanations offered to account for a set of phenomena. *Social theories* are explanations of social phenomena, such as why people choose to marry as they do or why people behave differently in different social situations. Theories (to use the term in its broadest sense) help us explain and predict a wide variety of events. For example, if asked why juvenile violence occurs, you will likely have an opinion on the cause or causes of such crimes. A scientist will use a **theory**, a set of interrelated statements or propositions, to attempt to answer the question about juvenile crime or any other social phenomenon. Theories are based on a set of assumptions, self-evident truths, and research; and they include definitions and describe the conditions in which the phenomenon exists.

While sociological theories exist to explain everything from childrearing to automobile sales, a small number of basic theories are predominate in the field. We will examine these theories and how each can be applied in work settings and in your personal life. They are also described in more detail and applied to specific settings throughout this book.

1.4a Structural Functional Theory

Structural functionalism has its roots in the work of the early sociologists, especially Durkheim and Weber. Among contemporary scholars, it is most closely associated with the work of Parsons and Merton. Structural functionalists use a macro-level analysis to explain society and social structures.

Structural functionalism is sometimes referred to as "social systems theory," "equilibrium theory," "order theory," or simply "functionalism." The terms *structure* and *function* refer to two separate, but closely related, concepts. *Structures* can be compared to the organs or parts of the body of an animal, and *functions* can be compared with the purposes of these structures. The stomach is a structure; digestion is its function. In the same way, healthcare organizations and the military are social structures (or **social systems**), and caring for the sick and defending governmental interests are their functions. Like a biological structure, a social system is composed of many interrelated and interdependent parts or structures.

If you were to visit any society in the world, from the largest to the smallest, you would find that most societies, if not all, are comprised of five major structures: family, religion, education, economy, and government. According to structural functionalism, the overall function of a society is dependent on each structure performing its required duties. Those advocating this theory believe that all structures are interrelated and interdependent on each other. When working properly, a social system performs specific functions that make it possible for society and the people who comprise that society to exist. Therefore, each structure serves a function that leads to the maintenance or stability of the larger society. The educational system is intended to provide literary and technical skills; the religious system is intended to provide emotional support and to answer questions about the unknown; families are intended to socialize infants and children, and so on. The functionalist perspective assumes these social systems have an underlying tendency to be in equilibrium or balance; any system failing to fulfill its functions will result in an imbalance or disequilibrium. In extreme cases, the entire system can break down when a change or failure in any one part of the system affects its interrelated parts.

According to Merton, a social system can have both **manifest functions** and **latent functions**. *Manifest functions* are intended and recognized; *latent functions* are neither intended nor recognized. One manifest function of education systems is to teach literary and technical skills. They also perform latent functions, such as providing supervision for children while parents work and providing contacts for dating and even for marriage. Correctional institutions have the manifest functions of punishment and removing criminals from social interaction within the larger society. They may also perform the latent functions of providing criminals with advanced training in other criminal behaviors.

Merton recognized that not all consequences of systems are functional—that is, they do not all lead to the maintenance of the system. Some lead to instability or the breakdown of a system. He termed these consequences **dysfunctions**. Families have a manifest function of rearing children. The intensity of family interactions, however, can lead to the dysfunction, or negative consequence, of domestic violence and child abuse. Dysfunctions such as these may lead to the disruption of relationships within the family system or even to the total breakdown of the system.

Sociologists who adhere to the functionalist perspective examine the parts of a given system and try to determine how they are related to one another and to the whole. They

BVT Lab

Flashcards are available for this chapter at www.BVTLab.com.

Structural functionalism
The theory that societies contain certain interdependent structures, each of which performs certain functions for the maintenance of society

Social system
A set of interrelated social structures and the expectations that accompany them

Manifest functions
The intended consequences of a social system

Latent functions
The unintended consequences of a social system

Dysfunctions
In structural functional theory, factors that lead to the disruption or breakdown of the social system

observe the results of a given cluster or arrangement of parts, attempting to discover both the intended (manifest) and the unintended (latent) functions of these parts. In addition, they analyze which of these consequences contribute to the maintenance of a given system and which lead to the breakdown of the system. However, what may be functional in one system may be dysfunctional in another. For example, a function that is good for corporate profits may not be good for family solidarity, or one good for religious unity may not be good for ethnic integration.

According to the functionalist perspective, social systems exist because they fulfill some function for the society. Functionalists focus on order and stability, which has led some critics to argue it supports the status quo. With the emphasis on equilibrium and the maintenance of the system, the process of change, critics say, receives little attention.

APPLYING STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONAL THEORY

Structural functional theory is one of the most generally applicable perspectives in social science. It is used by academic sociologists to study and analyze every form of social system, including families, prisons, governments, communities, schools, sports teams, and many others.

Just as structural functionalism is broadly applicable to problems of interest to academic sociologists, so is it a useful tool for almost every type of applied sociological problem. It can be particularly useful as a means of identifying and analyzing the components and goals of a system and of ensuring that those goals are met. When we try to solve problems in any type of social system—whether it is a society, a corporation, a family, a sorority, or a sports team—we must answer some central questions. What are the parts of the system? What functions do the parts actually serve? What functions are they intended to serve? How do the parts influence each other?

A structural functionalist exploring the phenomenon of school violence may look toward the family structure for explanation. During the past 40 to 50 years, the structure of the family has changed considerably. Many women, once expected to stay home and raise children, have entered the paid workforce instead of becoming stay-at-home wives and mothers. Even when a woman wants to stay home, the cost of raising a family today generally requires both parents to provide a paycheck to make ends meet. In addition, divorce is more common today than when your parents were children, and thus the number of single parent families in society has increased. From a functionalist perspective, these issues could create dysfunction in the family. Children left home alone may spend time involved in deviant behavior, such as vandalism, shoplifting, drug or alcohol use, etc. One of the intended (manifest) functions of the family is for parents to supervise the behavior and activities of their children and to socialize them about respecting the law. A latent function of families can be social isolation due to the increasing amount of independence given to children. Continuous separation from family and friends, unsupervised activities on the computer, and the belief in personal space without parental interference, may create socialization problems for a child struggling to fit in somewhere. If he or she feels like an outsider at school, other children may respond with ridicule, teasing, and bullying. In a rare situation, the child may respond with violence toward those he or she believes are responsible for the problems experienced at school.

Robert Merton's theory of **functional alternatives** provides one way to avoid dysfunctions such as school violence. *Functional alternatives* are other ways to achieve the intended goal. Perhaps the family could provide an alternative for the child left alone, such as staying with a relative, attending an after school or sports program, or being involved in a community organization. It is imperative that parents recognize the

Functional alternatives
Meeting functions of the system in ways other than initially intended

problems experienced by their children, instead of dismissing them, and find solutions that work for everyone. This functional alternative would, hopefully, meet the needs of the child and lessen the chance of there being an episode of school violence.

The functional perspective can also be applied to tensions among the various parts of a system. The expectations or actions of the different parts of a system may fail to mesh. A building-supply store selling a variety of construction materials, for example, may have some employees who receive commissions from in-store sales and others who receive commissions from outside sales. Suppose that you are hired as an outside sales representative and you develop a large clientele of building contractors through contacts made while on the road. However, when one of those customers decides to purchase material directly from the store, an inside salesperson takes credit for the sale. Who should get the commission for the sale? The conflict arises not because of poor performance on the part of the salespeople but because of a systemic dysfunction. This lack of clarity and confusion over the store's specific goals and the goals of each of its parts can cause serious personnel conflicts that could undermine the business. In this situation, some type of explicit goal-setting or value-clarification process would be appropriate. These examples demonstrate how, by focusing on the functions of the parts of a system, we might be able to discover solutions to a problem.

1.4b Conflict Theory

Conflict theory, which also had its origins in early sociology—especially in the work of Karl Marx—has among its more recent proponents C. Wright Mills, Lewis Coser, Ralf Dahrendorf, and others. These sociologists share the view that society is best understood and analyzed in terms of conflict and power. Like structural functionalism, conflict theory entails macro-level analysis.

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Flashcards are available for this chapter at www.BVTLab.com.

Karl Marx began with a very simple assumption: Society is constructed around its economic organization, particularly the ownership of property. Marx argued that society basically consists of two classes: those who own the means of production (bourgeoisie) and those who provide the labor (proletariat). These two groups are in opposition of one another and experience, as a result, ongoing class conflict. While the proletariat provide the labor that creates the wealth for the bourgeoisie, they (the proletariat) are never paid what they are worth. The profits made from their labor remains primarily in the hands of those who own the means of production. According to Marx, in any economic system that supports inequality, the exploited classes eventually recognize their submissive and inferior status and revolt against the dominant class of property owners and employers. The story of history, then, is the story of class struggle between the owners and the workers, the dominators and the dominated, the powerful and the powerless. Ultimately, conflict theory is about the exploitation of one class of people by another class.

Contemporary conflict theorists assume that conflict is a permanent feature of social life and that, as a result, societies are in a state of constant change. Unlike Marx, however, these theorists rarely assume conflict is always based on class or that it always reflects economic organization and ownership. Conflicts are assumed to involve a broad range of groups or interests—young against old, male against female, or one racial group against another—as well as workers against employers. These conflicts occur because such things as power, wealth, and prestige are not available to everyone; they are limited commodities, and the demand exceeds the supply. Conflict theory also assumes those who have or control desirable goods, services, and other resources will defend and protect their own interests at the expense of others.

In this view, *conflict* does not mean the sort of event that makes headlines, such as war, violence, or open hostility. It is, instead, regarded as the struggle occurring day after day as people try to maintain and improve their positions in life. Neither should conflict be regarded as a destructive process leading to disorder and the breakdown of society. Theorists such as Dahrendorf and Coser have focused on the integrative nature

Conflict theory
A social theory that views conflict as inevitable and natural and as a significant cause of social change

of conflict, its value as a force contributing to order and stability. How can conflict be a constructive force? Basically, the answer is people with common interests join together to seek gains that will benefit all of those sharing these common interests. By the same token, conflict among groups focuses attention on inequalities and social problems that might never be resolved without conflict. Racial conflicts, for example, may serve to bind people with common interests together and may also lead to constructive social change, actually lessening the current conflict among groups.

There is an obvious contrast between the views of the functionalists, who regard society as balanced and in a state of equilibrium, and the views of conflict theorists, who assume that society is an arena of constant competition and change. Functionalists believe the social process is a continual effort to maintain harmony; conflict theorists believe it is a continual struggle to "get ahead." Functionalists view society as basically consensual, integrated, and static; conflict theorists believe it is characterized by constraint, conflict, and change. Whereas functionalists have been criticized for focusing on stability and the status quo, conflict theorists have been criticized for overlooking the less controversial and more orderly aspects of society.

APPLYING CONFLICT THEORY

Like structural functionalism, sociologists use conflict theory to explain the relationship between the parts of a social system and the inequalities that exist among these parts. In recognizing conflict as a permanent feature of the life of any social system, conflict theory can be used to discover and explain the sources of the conflict. In addition to discovering and explaining the sources of conflict, conflict theory may be used to help create techniques to deal with conflict or to use it constructively in the workplace and in your personal life. Sociologists working as therapists or counselors in juvenile detention centers recognize that if conflicts in relationships are not resolved, problems will likely manifest and ultimately lead to a worse impact on the child, family, and community.

In dealing with any situation, whether it is running a business, coaching a basketball team, teaching a class, presiding over a group, maintaining a family, or organizing a labor union, conflict theory tells us to look for the hidden strains and frustrations, particularly between those in power who make the decisions (bosses, managers, owners, administrators, teachers) and those who carry out these decisions (workers, players, students). Even when those involved do not express dissatisfaction, there may still be conflict. Conflict in relationships is not always explicit, nor do individuals always express it. Nonetheless, some clues might help you to recognize conflict.

Conflict in relationships is not always explicit and individuals do not always express it. However, certain clues can indicate inequalities in position between such relationship members as husbands and wives. (Shutterstock)

When sociologists or counselors are looking for answers to conflict, they often look to clues that indicate inequalities in position between schools and students, husbands and wives, or between managers and workers. Some of these clues, or expressions of power differentials, may include covert signs of anger (e.g., overeating, boredom, depression, illness, gossip); *passive aggression* (sarcasm, nitpicking, chronic criticism); *sabotage* (spoiling or undermining an activity another person has planned); *displacement* (directing anger at people or things another person cherishes); devitalization of the relationship (a relationship that has become lifeless, equivalent to "emotional divorce"); or violence, resulting from unreleased pressures and tensions (Lamanna and Riedmann, 2009). These same consequences are likely to occur in families or in any other relationship in which conflict is denied. Realizing this, a sociologist—or

anyone working with a group—might try to build into the group's activities some approved and expected ways of airing conflicts among members. Perhaps a basketball coach would initiate weekly "gripe sessions" where each member of the team is expected to discuss things that bother him or her about other players or about the coaches.

Conflict theory helps us realize that because conflict is normal and usually inevitable, it is okay to express it. In fact, some clinicians go so far as to recommend that their clients—whether they are married couples, universities, occupational groups, or sports teams—periodically engage in conflict to release tensions and initiate emotional interactions. For example, faculty members within university settings are represented by a president who is nominated and voted on by the body of the faculty at the university. The faculty president presides over the faculty senate comprised of members from each department within the university. The student body at the university has a similar structure where they elect a student body president and senate. To resolve conflict between the university and the students, the president of the student body will attend faculty senate meetings and express the concerns of the students. The faculty senate will listen to the concerns and vote on issues brought forth by the student body president. For example, a student body president is approached by a disabled student who is concerned over smoking areas close to the entrances to classroom buildings. She is confined to a wheelchair and at the level where a cigarette being tossed or "flicked" by a smoker could possibly injure her. The student body president listens to her concern and takes it to the student body senate; they vote to ban smoking on university property. However, they have to take this vote to the faculty senate, and the faculty senate, too, must vote to pass the smoking ban. If it passes, the bill would be sent to the president of the university for review and final approval. These organizations within the university and other settings are not meant to prescribe all-out war within groups but rather to encourage people with conflicts to develop explicit procedures to deal with differences in a rational and constructive way, instead of pretending they don't exist or will disappear on their own.

thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

1. How would structural functional theory and conflict theory address the issue of gender discrimination within the workplace? How would each of these theories explain the selection process for fraternities and sororities?
2. To what extent is conflict inherent in the university setting? Is conflict primarily between student and university, student and faculty, or between student and student? Explain your answer.

1.4c Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory, although influenced somewhat by early European sociologists, was developed largely through the efforts of George Herbert Mead, W. I. Thomas, and Charles Horton Cooley—all who belonged to the Chicago School. The key difference between this perspective and those discussed earlier is the size of the units used in investigation and analysis. The previous two theories use a macro-level analysis to study societies; symbolic interaction theory, on the other hand, uses a micro-level approach. This theory studies individuals within societies, particularly the definitions and meanings attached to situations, rather than focusing on the large-scale structures.

Symbolic interaction theory
The social theory stressing interactions between people and the social processes that occur within the individual that are made possible by language and internalized meaning

The question of how individuals influence society and how society influences individuals is central to sociology. As you recall, early sociologists (Spencer, Durkheim, and Marx, for example) regarded society as an entity existing apart from the individual. Symbolic interactionists, however, assume society exists within every socialized

individual; and its external forms and structures arise through the social interactions taking place among individuals at the symbolic level.

What does "symbolic level" mean? It can be explained this way. Suppose you are driving down the road in your car, and you see a brick wall closing off the entire road. You stop, of course, because you have learned you cannot pass through a physical object. If, however, you are riding down the same road and you come to a stoplight, once again, you stop—but why? No physical object prevents you from progressing. Your reason for stopping is that you have learned the red light is a *symbol* that means, "stop." The world around us can be said to consist of these two elements: physical objects and abstract symbols. Language is a system of symbols. It represents physical objects or concepts used to communicate.

According to George Herbert Mead, who played an important role in the development of symbolic interactionism, it is the ability of humans to use symbols that sets us apart from other animals and that allows us to create social institutions, societies, and cultures. People in a society share an understanding of particular symbols (the stoplight, for example). Social learning takes place at both symbolic and non-symbolic levels. By interacting with others, we internalize social expectations, a specific language, and social values. In addition, we learn to share meanings and to communicate symbolically through words and gestures. As humans, we can interact at both a physical (e.g., a slap) and a symbolic (e.g., showing a fist or making a verbal threat) level. Since we can relate symbolically, we can carry on conversations with ourselves. We can also imagine the effects of different courses of action. We can imagine what would happen if we were to throw a rotten tomato in the face of a police officer. By thinking through alternative courses of action, we can choose those we believe to be the most appropriate for a given situation. The fact that others share similar expectations makes life patterned and relatively predictable. Those who fail to recognize that a red traffic light means stop will have trouble getting any place safely in their cars.

The world around us can be said to consist of two elements: physical objects and abstract symbols. A red stoplight is a symbol that we have learned means "stop." (Shutterstock)

The interactionist perspective examines patterns and processes of everyday life that are generally ignored by many other perspectives. It raises questions about the self, the self in relationships with others, and the self and others in the wider social context. Why do some of us have negative feelings about ourselves? Why is it we can relate more easily with some persons than with others? Why do we feel more comfortable around friends than among strangers? How is it possible to interact with complete strangers or to know what to do in new situations? How are decisions made in families? Symbolic interactionists try to answer such questions by examining the individual in a social context. The starting point of this examination is the social setting in which an individual is born and the interactions he or she has with parents, siblings, teachers, neighbors, or others. From these interactions, we learn what is proper or improper, whether we are "good" or "bad," who is important, and so forth. A more complete explanation of this perspective is given in other sections throughout the book.

APPLYING SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY

The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes that people act on the basis of their interpretation of the language and symbols in a situation, and not the situation in and of itself. This perspective is useful, in that it points to the necessity of having people achieve at least a minimal agreement about the definition or meaning of a situation. One potential problem to develop in any

relationship—whether on the job or in the home—is the lack of consensus in people's definitions of a situation. The lack of consensus may be the result of a disagreement or a misunderstanding. The confusion may be about the roles individuals develop for themselves, the goals they think should be pursued collectively, or the ways in which resources (such as money or power) should be distributed. This could lead to a breakdown of a relationship altogether or to confusion, tension, strife, and general unhappiness, at the very least, within the relationship or social system. Some examples may show how the definition of a situation can be at the core of some interpersonal problems and how symbolic interaction theory can be used.

Imagine that you are the manager of a retail jewelry store, and you hire two salespeople. The salespeople are told their salaries will be partly straight pay and partly commission generated by their sales. Person A defines the situation as one in which potential customers should be divided equally between the two employees because they both work in the same place. Person B sees the situation as one of competition among the employees for sales. Both interpretations are possible and quite feasible. As a result, Person A sees Person B as aggressive, money-hungry, and cutthroat. Person B sees Person A as uncompetitive, complacent, and not sales-oriented. The tension mounts, and each salesperson believes the other has a personality problem. The problem, though, may be due not to personalities but to a lack of clarity about how each person defines what he or she has been employed to do. As the manager, how could your knowledge of symbolic interaction theory help you to resolve this problem? Symbolic interaction theory alerts us to the importance of effective communication among people so they can understand each other's perspectives. If this occurs, they may be able to coordinate their actions better. According to Johnson (1986), "the ultimate outcome is not only reinforcement of appropriate role performance but also the creation of a more supportive and satisfying atmosphere" (p. 60).

It is also important to understand that various individuals' definitions of a situation are related to their definitions of what constitutes a problem. Another person may not see what one person considers a problem as a problem. A male boss who continuously flirts with his female secretary through physical contact (arm touching, back rubbing, and so on) or sexually suggestive comments may think he is creating a friendly, supportive work atmosphere. He may be unaware that the secretary sees his actions as sexual overtures and feels harassed and exploited by his "friendliness."

Addressing the issue of school violence, a student who feels like an outsider, both at home and at school, may internalize the perceptions of others as hate or being unwanted. As a result he turns the perceptions of others inward and begins to see himself in the same way. Others in this individual's life may not have this perception at all but simply be focused on their own problems, completely unaware that the troubled youth perceives feelings of hate and being unwanted.

In each of these examples, open communication is needed so the definition of the situation can be clarified. Often a mediator, perhaps a sociologist but not necessarily, is needed to help explain each side to the other, in the hope of helping the parties to achieve at least a minimal agreement about the definition of the situation.

While the previous three theories are often cited as the major perspectives within the field of sociology, you should be familiar with some others that have made tremendous contributions to the study of society, social groups, and human behavior.

thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

Discuss how a symbolic theorist would explain "classroom conformity." Why do students, when asked questions by the professor, not respond, even when they know the answers?

1.4d Exchange Theory

Although symbolic interaction theory is the most widely used and recognized interaction perspective, exchange theory also falls within this general orientation. **Exchange theory** has a diverse intellectual heritage from sources in economics, anthropology, and psychology, as well as sociology. This perspective is based on the belief that life is a series of exchanges involving rewards and costs. In economic exchanges, people exchange money, goods, and services, hoping to profit or at least break even in the exchange. In anthropological, psychological, and sociological exchanges, the items of exchange include social and psychic factors. Consider the following: In return for your companionship, I'll invite you to my house; in return for your positive teacher evaluation, I'll work extra hard to be a good instructor. Work, gifts, money, affection, and ideas—all are offered in the hope of getting something in return.

Social exchange theory seeks to explain why behavioral outcomes such as marriage, employment, and religious involvement occur, given a set of structural conditions (age, race, gender, class) and interaction possibilities. Women, for example, marry men of a higher social status more frequently than men marry women of a higher social status. Exchange theorists would attempt to explain this finding by examining the desirable qualities men and women have to exchange. In the United States, for men to have money or a good job is viewed as desirable; for women to be physically attractive is viewed as desirable. Thus, we might expect that very attractive lower-status women could exchange their beauty for men of a higher economic and occupational status, which seems to be what happens.

Exchange theory assumes that people seek rewarding statuses, relationships, and experiences, and they try to avoid costs, pain, and punishments. Given a set of alternatives, individuals choose those from which they expect the most profit, rewards, or satisfaction; and they avoid those not profitable, rewarding, or satisfying. When the costs exceed the rewards, people are likely to feel angry and dissatisfied. When the rewards exceed the costs, they are likely to feel they got a good deal (unless they got it through exploitation or dishonesty, in which case, they may feel guilty and choose to avoid further interactions). Both parties are more likely to be satisfied with the interaction if there is perceived equity in the exchange, a feeling on the part of both that the rewards were worth the costs.

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Although people may work selflessly for others with no thought of reward, it is quite unusual. The social exchange perspective assumes that voluntary social interactions are contingent on rewarding reactions from others. When rewarding reactions cease, either the actions end or dissatisfaction results.

There are two different schools of thought in the exchange theory perspective. George Homans, the theorist responsible for originating exchange theory, represents a perspective consistent with that of behavioral psychologists, who believe that behavior can be explained in terms of rewards and punishments. Behaviorists focus their attention on actual behavior, not on processes that are inferred from behavior but cannot be observed. In exchange theory, the rewards and punishments are the behavior of other people, and those involved in exchanges assume their rewards will be proportional to their costs.

Peter Blau is the advocate of a different school of exchange theory, one that is consistent with symbolic interactionism. Blau does not attempt to explain all exchanges in terms of observable behavior. He argues the exchange is more subjective and interpretive and exchanges occur on a symbolic level. As a result, money may be a just reward only if the receiver defines it as such; and psychic rewards of satisfaction with doing a good job or of pleasing someone may be as important as money, gifts, or outward responses of praise.

Exchange theory
A theory of interaction that attempts to explain social behavior in terms of reciprocity of costs and rewards

Both Homans and Blau agree that what is important is that each party in the exchange must receive something perceived as equivalent to that which is given (to Homans, "distributive justice"; to Blau, "fair exchange"). All exchange involves a mutually held

Table 1-2 Major Perspectives in Sociology

Theory	Level of Analysis	View of Society	Major Concepts	Pros and Cons of Theory
Functionalism	Macro	Society consists of interdependent parts, each fulfilling certain functions.	Structure, function, manifest and latent function, dysfunction	**Pros:** examines structures within society; examines the "big picture"; emphasizes the impact that structures have in relation to consequences for society **Cons:** does not emphasize the interactions between individuals
Conflict	Macro	Society consists of conflict between diverse groups within society competing for valuable and scarce resources.	Means of production, proletariat, bourgeoisie, social class, scarce resources	**Pros:** examines stratification and inequality and the reasons that they exist; examines who benefits from existing social relationships **Cons:** does not explore competition within society as potentially beneficial
Interactionism	Micro	Interactions between people in society are negotiated using symbols, gestures, and communications, including non-verbal ones.	Symbols, social construction, definition of the situation	**Pros:** examines day-to-day interactions between people; examines the relationship between identity and social interaction **Cons:** does not emphasize the ways in which large-scale structures affect interaction
Exchange	Micro	Actions are determined by weighing rewards and costs.	Exchanges, rewards, costs, benefits, negotiation	**Pros:** examines day-to-day interactions between people in terms of rewards and costs **Cons:** does not emphasize the way in which large-scale structures affect interaction
Evolutionary	Macro	Social systems evolve naturally from simple to complex.	Organism, social arrangements, social systems, simple, complex, survival of the fittest	**Pros:** looks at society as evolving naturally over time; brings in the possibility of social evolution as connected with biological evolution **Cons:** does not emphasize the potential negativity of "survival of the fittest" concept

expectation that reciprocation will occur. If resources or exchange criteria are unequal, one person is at a distinct disadvantage; and the other has power over and controls the relationship. As a result, in marriage, unequal exchanges between husband and wife are likely to result in dominance of one over the other or may even end the relationship. In employment, if employee and employer do not recognize a fair exchange of rewards and costs, dissatisfaction may result. The employee may quit, or the employer may dismiss the employee.

In exchange theory, then, social life is viewed as a process of bargaining or negotiation, and social relationships are based on trust and mutual interests. In recent years, some sociologists have criticized exchange theory as overly adhering to economic and mathematical models that do not put enough emphasis on the human elements or content of a situation (Zafirovsky, 2003).

thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

1. Select a group or organization in which you are involved and explore it in terms of structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and exchange theory. What types of things would each perspective be interested in finding out? What types of answers might each perspective reach? Which theory or theories do you think most accurately explain the group or organization you selected? For help with this, review Table 1-2 (Major Perspectives in Sociology) and look especially at each of the theories' "views of society" and "major concepts." These should help you think about the types of questions each theory might generate.
2. Select a contemporary social problem and examine it using the Exchange Theory.

1.4e Evolutionary Theory

The evolutionary approach is associated with biological concepts and concerned with long-term change. **Evolutionary theory** suggests that societies, like biological organisms, progress through stages of increasing complexity. Like ecologists, evolutionists suggest that societies, also like organisms, are interdependent with their environments.

Most of the early sociologists and some recent ones adhere to an evolutionary view. Early sociologists often equated evolution with progress and improvement, believing natural selection would eliminate weak societies and those that could not adapt. The strong societies, they believed, deserved to survive because they were better. It was for this reason that early theorists, such as Spencer, opposed any sort of interference protecting the weak and interfering with natural evolutionary processes.

Contemporary evolutionists, on the other hand, rarely oppose all types of intervention. They tend to view evolution as a process resulting in change, but they do not assume changes are necessarily for the better. Almost all would agree that society is becoming more complex, for example; however, they might argue that complexity brings about bad things as well as good. The telephone is a good illustration of a technological improvement making our lives more complex. Surely it is an improvement—it permits us to be in contact with the whole world without stirring from our homes—but a contemporary evolutionist might point out a phone can also be an annoyance, as students trying to study and harried office workers can attest. Early evolutionists, on the other hand, would have been more likely to regard the telephone as a sign of progress and, hence, an unmixed blessing.

Evolutionary theory provides us with a historical and cross-cultural perspective from which to judge a wide range of social influences. If its basic premises of directional change and increasing complexity are valid, it should provide better comprehension of current trends and even help us to predict the future.

Although each of the theoretical perspectives has been discussed separately with regard to how they can be applied, it is important to note that in most cases, more than one can be used; and some may even be used in conjunction with each other. It should also be noted that even though some of the applications discussed might not be exactly what the people who originally devised the theories had in mind, this does not lessen the validity of these applications. On the contrary, using scientific theories in ways that extend beyond their original purpose demonstrates the significance of the theories. A number of additional theoretical orientations are discussed briefly to conclude this section.

Evolutionary theory
A theory of social development that suggests that societies, like biological organisms, progress through stages of increasing complexity

1.4f Additional Theoretical Perspectives and the Future of Sociological Theory

The reader should not be led to think that structural functionalism, conflict, symbolic interaction, exchange, and evolutionary theories compose all of the theories or theoretical perspectives in sociology. From the 1950s through the 1970s, sociology could have been more easily described in terms of these five theories with structural functionalism reigning supreme in the 1950s and conflict theory taking a strong foothold in the 1960s. However, by the mid-1980s, sociology began a proliferation of new theoretical perspectives (Turner, J. H., 2006). Ritzer (1999), sees this as a time of theoretical synthesis: an integration of micro and macro ideas, an integration of Marx's ideas into structural functionalism, a joining of exchange and structural theories into a new network theory, and so forth.

An example of an older, interdisciplinary, theoretical linkage can be seen in *sociobiological* orientations. You may have noted that Spencer's ideas of the survival of the fittest, described earlier in this chapter, had a biological base. Today, sociobiological theories link social behavior (crime, drinking, aggression, and so forth) to genetic or biological factors. For example, a sociobiologist would probably explain male sexual dominance or female nurturance by the differing genetic makeup of the sexes. If male-female differences are biologically determined, it could be expected that social influences would not greatly modify behavior. It could also lead to justifying sexual and racial inequalities because "that's the way things are," and little can be done to change them. Yet sociologists note, in spite of biological predispositions toward a particular behavior pattern, wide variations exist in sexual domination, nurturance, and other behaviors generally assigned to one sex or the other. Beliefs that human behaviors can be changed led to other theoretical linkages, such as the two examples that follow: humanistic and feminist theories.

Humanistic theories, consistent with ideas expressed by Marx, reject the positivist position that social science can or should be value free. This perspective is based on the following beliefs and practices: Sociologists or other social scientists should be actively involved in social change; efforts should be made toward achieving social justice and equity for everyone irrespective of gender or race; the mind has "free will"; and humans are in charge of controlling their own destiny. As Chapter 11 makes clear, secular humanism (the solving of problems by humans through their own efforts) disputes the religious focus on a god or on supernatural powers. Sociologists often take a humanistic perspective with a goal of using the knowledge, skills, and tools of sociology to improve social conditions and the lives of those less fortunate.

Feminist theories and perspectives hold the belief that gender is basic to all social structure and organization. The impetus for contemporary feminist theory involves a simple question: How do women interpret and experience the world differently from men? Answers to this question are based on beliefs that gender should not be the basis of social inequality, nor should men be more valued in the political arena (as more effective leaders of the country), in the home (as heads of the house), or in the workplace (where they sometimes make more money than women). Early waves of the feminist movement focused on equal rights. Contemporary feminist perspectives include multicultural, liberal, and socialist perspectives, and examine the interlocking systems of racism, sexism, and class. This "third wave" movement is marked by a desire for personal empowerment.

thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

Discuss the humanists' idea that sociologists should use their knowledge and skills to improve social conditions and the feminists' idea that gender is basic to all social organization and interaction.

CHAPTER 1

Wrapping it up

Summary

1. Sociology is the study of society, social life, and the causes and consequences of human social behavior. The terms *society* and *social life* encompass interpersonal relations within and among social groups and social systems. Sociologists study a wide range of behavior—from small groups (families) to large ones (bureaucracies)—question the obvious, seek patterns and regularities, and look beyond individuals to social interactions and group processes.
2. Sociological imagination is the ability to see the world from a sociological point of view. Using sociological imagination, an individual is able to analyze a social phenomenon from a sociological perspective. This perspective can be applied both to microsociology, which considers problems at the level of interpersonal and small-group processes, and to macrosociology, which considers large-scale problems, structures, social organizations, and social systems.
3. Although many people believe the structure and workings of society are a matter of common knowledge, countless sociological findings disprove popular conceptions and provide surprising insights.
4. Sociology is one of the social science disciplines that tries to systematically and objectively understand social life and predict how various influences will affect it. Each social science attempts to accumulate a body of knowledge about a particular aspect of society and the social world. Other social sciences include economics, political science, anthropology, psychology, history, and geography.
5. Compared with the other sciences, sociology is of recent origin. Not until the 1880s was a scientific methodology applied to social phenomena. The Industrial Revolution and political upheavals in Europe encouraged various scholars to try to explain social change and the social order. Five theorists who had an especially important influence on the development of sociology are Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Martineau.
6. In the early 1900s, the development of sociology in America grew rapidly, drawing heavily from earlier European scholars. The Chicago School of thought focused on micro-level approaches with important contributions made by sociologists—such as Cooley, Mead, and Thomas—who stressed the importance of social interaction and the influence of society on human thought and action.
7. Not until the 1930s did sociology shift from the University of Chicago to other major educational institutions. In the eastern United States, Parsons, Merton, Mills, Coser, Homans, and Blau were influential in the development of social theory.
8. A social theory is a systematically interrelated proposition that seeks to explain a process or phenomena. Five major theories—three at the macro level and two at the micro level—have had an important influence on contemporary sociology: structural functional theory, conflict theory, symbolic interactional theory, exchange theory, and evolutionary theory.
9. Structural functional theory focuses on the parts of a system, the relationships among these parts, and the functions or consequences of social structures. These functions can be either manifest (intended and recognized) or latent (unintended and unrecognized). Some consequences are dysfunctional, in that they lead to the instability and breakdown of the system. Structural functional theories assume that systems have a tendency toward equilibrium and balance.
10. Conflict theory assumes that conflict is a permanent feature of social life and a key source of change. The Marxist orientation toward conflict assumes that it is rooted in a class struggle between the employers and the workers or between the powerful and the powerless. Many conflict theorists assume that conflict serves an integrative function and acts as a source of constructive change.

11. Symbolic interactionism, a micro-level theory, emphasizes relationships among individuals and between individuals and society. According to this theory, society is based on shared meanings, language, social interaction, and symbolic processes. It is the mind that differentiates humans from nonhumans and permits people to develop a social self, to assume the roles of others, and to imaginatively consider alternative courses of action.
12. Exchange theory assumes that social life involves a series of reciprocal exchanges consisting of rewards and costs. Exchange theories endeavor to explain why particular behavioral outcomes result from a given set of structural conditions and interaction possibilities.
13. Evolutionary theory suggests that societies, like biological organisms, go through transitions or stages and are interdependent with the environment or world around them.
14. Other theoretical perspectives or orientations include sociobiology, humanism, and feminism. The latter two both reject a positivist notion of total objectivity and noninvolvement and stress instead the need for active involvement in social change.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the sociological perspective, and discuss how it changes the way we look at societies that are different from our own.
2. What is the difference between macrosociology and microsociology? How would each examine police corruption?
3. Explain why common-sense knowledge is not the best source of information. With this in mind, discuss why women who are victims of domestic violence stay in abusive relationships.
4. Discuss what the social sciences have in common. How is each unique or different from the others?
5. What influenced the development of sociology both in Europe and in America?
6. The contributions of women and minorities in early sociology were largely overlooked. Explain what factors contributed to their lack of recognition by the field.
7. Why did early sociologists use natural science terms and methods to describe society? Discuss some shortcomings in following this approach.
8. Spencer's idea of "survival of the fittest" led to his belief in noninterference in human affairs. Explain how Spencer's beliefs would influence today's welfare system in the United States.
9. How might conflict theory apply to male and female workers in a field dominated primarily by men, such as construction work?
10. From a symbolic interactionist perspective explain why burning the American flag creates anger among most U.S. citizens. In your discussion, consider the significance of symbols and their meanings.
11. Apply social exchange theory to the interaction between you and your parents or your best friend. What are the costs and rewards of these relationships? What happens when the social exchanges are not defined as equitable?