CHAPTER 1

The Study of Society

What Is Sociology?

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

If Theresa were the only woman with bad taste in men or Mike the only man who drank too much, then we might try to understand their behavior by peering into their personalities. We know, however, that there are millions of men and women who have disappointing romances and who drink too much. We also know that women are more likely than men to sacrifice their needs to keep a romance alive, and that men are more likely than women to drown their troubles in drink. To understand Mike and Theresa, then, we must place them in a larger context and examine the forces that lead some *groups* of people to behave so differently from other groups.

Sociology is the systematic study of human society, social groups, and social interactions. It emphasizes the larger context in which Mike, Theresa, and the rest of us live.

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

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

The second major sociological concept is **social structure**, the larger structure of the play in which the roles appear. What is the whole set of roles that appears in this play? How are the roles interrelated? Do some actors and roles have more power than others? And how does this affect the outcome of the play? Thus, we understand the role of student in the context of the social structure we call *education*, a context in which teachers have more power than students, and administrators more power than teachers. By examining roles and social structure, sociologists try to understand the human drama.

Sociology is the systematic study of human society, social groups, and social interactions.

A **role** is a set of norms specifying the rights and obligations associated with a status.

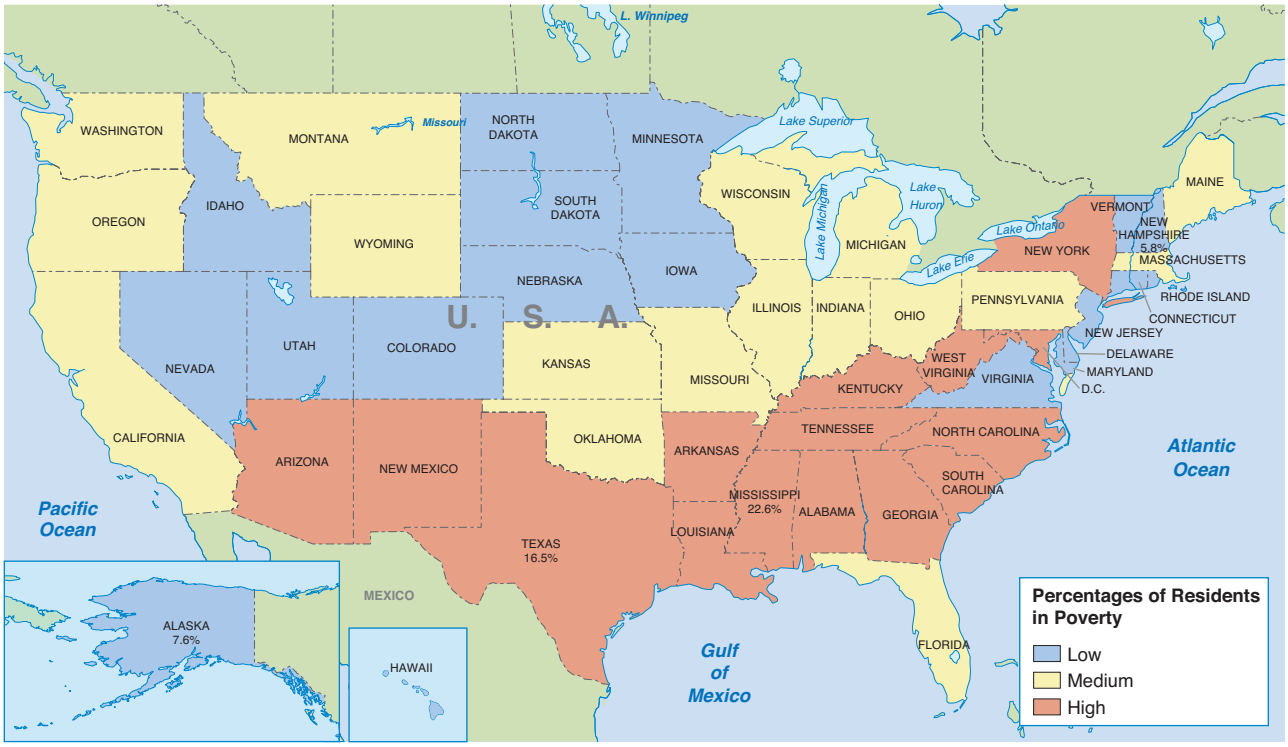
A **social structure** is a recurrent pattern of relationships among groups.

The **sociological imagination** is the ability to recognize how apparently personal issues at least partly reflect broader social structures.

The Sociological Imagination

The **sociological imagination** refers to the ability to recognize how apparently personal issues at least partly reflect broader social structures (Mills 1959, 15). According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination is what we use when we realize that

MAP 1.1: States with Low, Medium, and High Percentages of Residents in Poverty
Poverty is more common in rural areas, in the south and southwest, on isolated Native American reservations, and in states with many less-educated, Hispanic, and African American residents.
SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (2009b).



some personal troubles (such as poverty, divorce, or loss of faith) are actually common public issues that reflect a larger social context. Mills suggests that many of the things we experience as individuals are really beyond our control. Instead, they reflect the way society as a whole is organized. For example, Mills writes:

> When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is [a public] issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals. (Mills 1959, 9)

Map 1.1 illustrates this issue. As it shows, the percentage of people living in poverty varies from 6 percent in New Hampshire to 23 percent in Mississippi. These data suggest that poverty does not result simply from personal characteristics but instead reflects something about where we live—most likely, the number of jobs and the number of people chasing those jobs.

In everyday life, we rarely consider the impact of history, economic patterns, and social structures on our own experiences. If a child becomes a drug addict, parents tend to blame themselves; if spouses divorce, each tends to blame the other; if a

AP Images

Unemployment is so high in some areas that hundreds of people now show up at job fairs, such as at this one in San Mateo, California.

student does poorly in school, most blame only the student. To develop the sociological imagination is to understand how outcomes such as these are, in part, a product of society and not fully within the control of the individual.

Some people do poorly in school, for example, not because they are stupid or lazy but because they are faced with conflicting roles and role expectations. The "this is the best time of your life" play calls for very different roles and behaviors from the "education is the key to success" play. Those who adopt the student role in the "best time of your life" play will likely earn lower grades than those in the "education is the key to success" play. Other people may do poorly because they come from a family that does not give them the financial or psychological support they need. In fact, their family may need them to earn an income to help support their younger brothers and sisters. These students may be working 25 hours a week in addition to going to school; they may be going to school despite their family's lack of understanding of why college is important, or why college students need quiet and privacy for studying. In contrast, other students may find it difficult to fail: Their parents provide tuition, living expenses, and emotional support, as well as a laptop, iPhone, and new car. As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 12, parents' social class is one of the best predictors of who will fail and who will graduate. Success or failure depends to a large extent on social factors.

The sociological imagination—the ability to see our own lives and those of others as part of a larger social structure—is central to sociology. Once we develop this imagination, we will be less likely to believe that individual behavior results solely from individual personalities. Instead, we will also consider how roles and social structures affect behavior. Similarly, we will recognize that to solve social problems, we will likely have to change social structures and roles, not just change individuals. Although poverty, divorce, and racism are experienced as intensely personal hardships, we can't eliminate or alleviate them by giving everyone personal therapy. To solve these and many other social problems, we need to change social structures; we need to rewrite the play and rebuild the theater. The sociological imagination offers a new way to look at—and a new way to solve—common troubles and dilemmas that individuals face.

The sociological imagination does *not*, however, imply that individuals have no options or bear no responsibility for their choices. Even slaves can choose to work more slowly, to ridicule their owners in private, or to commit suicide. The sociological imagination does, however, suggest the benefits of considering the impact both of social forces and of the personal choices that we more often notice.

Sociology as a Social Science

Sociology focuses on how people (and groups) interact, as well as on the rules of behavior that structure those interactions. Its emphasis is on patterns of interaction—how these patterns develop, how they are maintained, and how they change.

As one of the social sciences, sociology has much in common with political science, economics, psychology, and anthropology. All these fields share an interest in human social behavior and, to some extent, an interest in society. In addition, they all share an emphasis on the scientific method as the best approach to knowledge. This means that they rely on **empirical research**—research based on systematic examination of the evidence—before reaching any conclusions and expect researchers to evaluate that evidence in an unbiased, objective fashion. This empirical approach is what distinguishes the social sciences from journalism and other fields that comment on the human condition. Sociology differs from the other social sciences in its particular focus. Anthropologists are primarily interested in human (and nonhuman) *culture*. For example, anthropologists have studied why rape is more common in some cultures than in others and what purposes are served by cultural celebrations like bar mitzvahs, high school graduation parties, Mardi Gras, and *quinceañeras*. Psychologists focus on individual behavior and thought patterns, such as why some individuals experience more anxiety or gamble more than others. Political scientists study political systems and behaviors, such as how dictatorships rise and fall, and economists study how goods and services are produced, distributed, and consumed, such as why cell phones with cameras are so popular. Although sociologists, too, study culture, individual behavior, politics, and the economy, their focus is always on how these and other issues affect and are affected by social groups and social interactions.

The Emergence of Sociology

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

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

This turmoil provided the inspiration for much of the intellectual effort of the nineteenth century, such as Charles Dickens's novels and Karl Marx's revolutionary

sociology and you

Given current economic conditions, it's likely that you know one or more persons who have lost their homes to foreclosure. It's possible that they used poor judgment and took on more mortgage debt than they could reasonably expect to pay. But if you use the sociological imagination, you might also question whether other forces were at play: Did they lose their homes because they worked in construction or in another field that has crashed? Did mortgage lenders pressure them to take on unreasonably high levels of debt? Did recent changes in lending laws allow lenders to charge them very high rates of interest? The sociological imagination suggests that to truly understand how the world works, we need to analyze the broader social structure as well as individual behaviors and characteristics.

Empirical research is research based on systematic, unbiased examination of evidence.

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Auguste Comte, 1798–1857

theories. It also inspired the empirical study of society. These were the years in which scientific research was a new enterprise and nothing seemed too much to hope for. After electricity, the telegraph, and the X-ray, who was to say that researchers could not discover how to eliminate crime, poverty, or war? Many hoped that the tools of empirical research could help in understanding and controlling a rapidly changing society.

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

The upheavals in nineteenth-century Europe stimulated the development of sociology as a discipline. We will look at five theorists—Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber—who are often considered the founders of sociology.

August Comte (1798–1857)

The first major figure in the history of sociology was the French philosopher Auguste Comte. He coined the term *sociology* in 1839, and many regard him as the founder of this field.

Comte was among the first to suggest that the scientific method could be applied to social events (Konig 1968). The philosophy of positivism, which he developed, asserts that the social world can be studied with the same scientific accuracy and assurance as the natural world. Once scientists figured out the laws of social behavior, he and other positivists believed, they would be able to predict and control it. Although thoughtful people wonder whether we will ever be able to predict human behavior as accurately as we can predict the behavior of molecules, the scientific method remains central to sociology.

Another of Comte's lasting contributions was his recognition that an understanding of society requires a concern for both the sources of order and continuity and the sources of change. These concerns remain central to sociological research, under the labels of social structure (order) and social process (change).

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Herbert Spencer, 1820–1903

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)

Another pioneer in sociology was the British philosopher-scientist Herbert Spencer. Spencer argued that evolution led to the development of social, as well as natural, life. He viewed society as similar to a giant organism: Just as the heart and lungs work together to sustain the life of the organism, so the parts of society work together to maintain society.

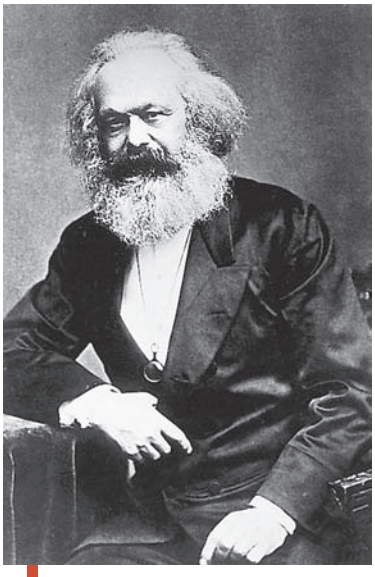
These ideas led Spencer to two basic principles that still guide the study of sociology. First, he concluded that each society must be understood as an adaptation to its environment. This principle of adaptation implies that to understand society, we must focus on processes of growth and change. It also implies that there is no "right" way for a society to be organized. Instead, societies will change as circumstances change.

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

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Karl Marx was born in Germany in 1818. A philosopher, economist, and social activist, he received his doctorate in philosophy at the age of 23. Because of his radical views, however, he never became a professor and spent most of his adult life in exile and poverty (McLellan 2006).

Marx was repulsed by the poverty and inequality that characterized the nineteenth century. Unlike other scholars of his day, he refused to see poverty as either a natural or a God-given condition of the human species. Instead, he viewed poverty and inequality as human-made conditions fostered by private property and capitalism. As a result, he devoted his intellectual efforts to understanding—and eliminating—capitalism. Many of Marx's ideas are of more interest to political scientists and economists than to sociologists, but he left two enduring legacies to sociology: the theories of economic determinism and the dialectic.



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Karl Marx, 1818–1883

ECONOMIC DETERMINISM Marx began his analysis of society by assuming that the most basic task of any human society is to provide food and shelter to sustain itself. Marx argued that the ways in which society does this—its modes of production—provide the foundations on which all other social and political arrangements are built. Thus, he believed that economic relationships *determine* (that is, cause) the particular form that family, law, religion, and other social structures take in a given society. Scholars call this idea **economic determinism**.

A good illustration of economic determinism is the influence of economic conditions on marriage choices. In traditional agricultural societies where the older generation owns the only economic resource—land—young people often remain economically dependent upon their parents until well into adulthood. To survive, they must remain in their parents' good graces; this means, among other things, that they cannot marry without their parents' approval. In societies where young people can earn a living without their parents' help, however, they can marry whenever and whomever they please. Marx would argue that this shift in mate selection practices is the result of changing economic relationships.

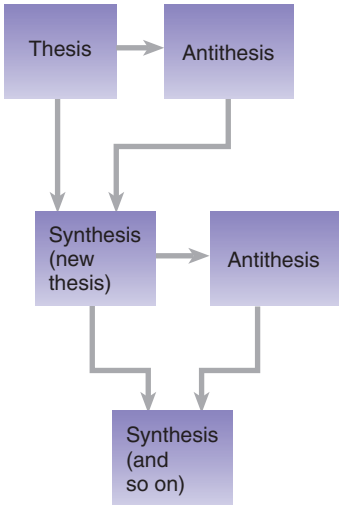
Because Marx saw all human relations as stemming ultimately from the economic systems, he suggested that the major goal of a social scientist is to understand economic relationships: Who owns what, and how does this pattern of ownership affect human relationships?

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

Marx's thinking on conflict was influenced by the German philosopher Georg Hegel. Hegel argued that for every idea (thesis), a counter idea (antithesis) develops to challenge it. The conflict between thesis and antithesis then produces a new idea (synthesis). The process through which thesis and antithesis lead to synthesis is called the **dialectic** (Figure 1.1).

Marx's contribution was to apply this model of change to economic and social systems. Within capitalism, Marx suggested, the capitalist class was the thesis and the working class was the antithesis. He predicted that conflicts between them would lead to a new synthesis. That synthesis would be a communistic economic system. Indeed, in his role as social activist, Marx hoped to encourage conflict and ignite the

FIGURE 1.1 The Dialectic
The dialectic model of change suggests that change occurs through conflict and resolution rather than through evolution.



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

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

Emile Durkheim, 1858–1917

revolution that would bring about the desired change. The workers, he declared, "have nothing to lose but their chains" (Marx & Engels 1967, 258).

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

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

Emile Durkheim's life overlapped with that of Marx. While Marx was starving as an exile in England, however, Durkheim spent most of his career as a professor at the Sorbonne, the most elite university in France. Far from rejecting society, Durkheim embraced it. His research focused on understanding how societies remain stable and how stable societies foster individual happiness. Whereas Marx's legacy is a theory that highlights social conflict and social change, Durkheim's legacy is a theory that highlights social stability. Together they allow us to understand both order and change.

Durkheim's major works are still considered essential reading in sociology. These include his studies of suicide, education, divorce, crime, and social change. Two enduring contributions are his ideas about the balance between individual goals and social rules and about social science methods.

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

In his classic study *Suicide,* Durkheim identified two types of suicide that stem from an imbalance between social regulation and personal freedom. *Fatalistic* suicide occurs when society provides too little freedom and too much regulation: when we find our behavior so confined by social institutions that we feel trapped ([1897] 1951, 276). One example would be the young mother with several children and a job who feels overburdened by the demands of work, household, and family. *Anomic* suicide, on the other hand, occurs when there is too *much* freedom and too *little* regulation: when society's influence does not check individual passions ([1897] 1951, 258). Durkheim believed that this kind of suicide was most likely to occur in times of rapid social change. When established ways of doing things have lost their meaning, but no clear alternatives have developed, individuals feel lost. For example, many scholars attribute high rates of alcohol abuse among contemporary Native Americans to the weakening of traditional social regulation.

Durkheim was among the first to stress the importance of using reliable statistics to logically rule out incorrect theories of social life and to identify more promising theories. He strove to be an objective observer who only sought the facts. As sociology

Some Christians baptize infants by sprinkling a few drops of holy water on their foreheads. Others baptize adults by fully immersing them in flowing water. To sociologists following in Weber's footsteps, the *fact* that different Christians use different forms of baptism is less important than the *meaning* these practices have for them.

became an established discipline, this ideal of objective observation replaced Marx's social activism as the standard model for social science.

Max Weber (1864–1920)

Max Weber (vay-ber), a German economist, historian, and philosopher, provided the theoretical base for half a dozen areas of sociological inquiry. He wrote on religion, bureaucracy, method, and politics. In all these areas, his work is still valuable and insightful. Three of Weber's more general contributions were an emphasis on the subjective meanings of social actions, on social as opposed to economic causes, and on the need for objectivity in studying social issues. Weber believed that knowing patterns of behavior was less important than understanding the meanings people attach to behavior. For example, Weber would argue that it is relatively meaningless to compile statistics such as how many marriages end in divorce now compared with 100 years ago. More critical, he would argue, is understanding how the *meaning* of divorce has changed over that time period. Weber's emphasis on the subjective meanings of human actions has been the foundation of scholarly work on topics as varied as religion and immigration.

Weber trained as an economist, and much of his work concerned the interplay of things economic and things social. He rejected Marx's idea that economic factors determine all social relationships. In a classic study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1904–05] 1958), Weber tried to show how social and religious values can affect economic systems. This argument is explained more fully in Chapter 12, but its major thesis is that the religious values of early Protestantism (self-discipline, thrift, and individualism) were the foundation for capitalism.

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

Max Weber, 1864–1920

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

W. E. B. DuBois, 1868–1963

Jane Addams, 1860–1935

adhere to Marxist principles generally reject the notion of value-free sociology. Most modern sociologists, however, try to be value-free in their scholarly work.

Sociology in the United States

Although U.S. sociology has the same intellectual roots as European sociology, it has some distinctive characteristics. Most importantly, European sociologists are more likely to focus on constructing broad, philosophical theories of how society works, whereas U.S. sociologists more often focus on collecting systematic, empirical data. As this suggests, U.S. sociologists more often stress identifying, understanding, and solving social problems.

One reason that U.S. sociology developed differently from European sociology is that our social problems differed. Between the 1860s and the 1920s, slavery, the Civil War, and high immigration rates made racism and ethnic discrimination much more salient issues in the United States than in Europe. One of the first sociologists to study these issues was W. E. B. DuBois, who received his doctorate in 1895 from Harvard University, devoted his career to developing empirical data about African Americans, and used those data to combat racism.

The work of Jane Addams, another early sociologist and recipient of the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize, also illustrates the emphasis on social problems and social reform within early U.S. sociology. Addams was the founder of Hull House, a famous center for social services and community activism located in a Chicago slum. She and her colleagues used quantitative social science data to lobby successfully for legislation mandating safer working conditions, a better juvenile justice system, improved public sanitation, and services for the poor (Linn & Scott 2000).

Today, many U.S. sociologists continue to focus on how race, class, and gender—both individually and jointly—affect all aspects of social life. More broadly, an interest in helping to solve crucial social problems is central to the work of most U.S. sociologists. They hope to change the world for the better by systematically studying social life and making their research findings available to others. In addition, some sociologists work in social movements or for social change organizations to try more directly to alleviate social problems. Finally, a small but growing number of U.S. sociologists take their research directly to the public and policy makers: appearing on *Oprah* and *The Today Show*, publishing in the *New York Times* and on *Slate.com*, and testifying in court and before Congress regarding the nature of social issues and how best to address them.

As sociological research came of age, sociology also became a part of mainstream higher education. Almost all colleges and universities now offer an undergraduate degree in sociology. Most universities offer a master's degree in the subject, and approximately 125 offer doctoral degree programs. Graduate sociology programs are more popular in the United States than in any other country in the world.

Current Perspectives in Sociology

As this brief review of the history of sociology has demonstrated, there are many ways of approaching the study of human social interaction. The ideas of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others have given rise to dozens of theories about human behavior. In this section, we summarize the three dominant theoretical perspectives in sociology today: structural-functional theory, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction theory. The Concept Summary on Major Theoretical Perspectives describes these three perspectives.

concept summary

Major Theoretical Perspectives

	Structural Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Symbolic Interactionism
Nature of society	Interrelated social structures that fit together to form an integrated whole	Competing interests, each seeking to secure its own ends	Interacting individuals and groups
Basis of interaction	Consensus and shared values	Constraint, power, and competition	Shared symbolic meanings
Major questions	What are social structures? Do they contribute to social stability?	Who benefits? How are these benefits maintained?	How do social structures relate to individual subjective experiences?
Level of analysis	Social structure	Social structure	Interpersonal interaction

Structural-Functional Theory

Structural-functional theory (or *structural functionalism*) addresses the question of how social organization is maintained. This theoretical perspective has its roots in natural science and in the analogy between society and an organism. In the same way that a biologist may try to identify the parts (structures) of a cell and determine how they work (function), a sociologist who uses structural-functional theory will try to identify the structures of society and how they function.

The Assumptions behind Structural-Functional Theory

All sociologists are interested in researching how societies work. Those who use the structural-functionalist perspective, however, bring three major assumptions to their research:

1. *Stability*. The chief evaluative criterion for any social pattern is whether it contributes to the maintenance of society.
2. *Harmony*. Like the parts of an organism, the parts of society typically work together harmoniously for the good of the whole.
3. *Evolution*. Change occurs through evolution—the mostly peaceful adaptation of social structures to new needs and demands and the elimination of unnecessary or outmoded structures.

Using Structural-Functional Theory

Sociologists who use structural-functional theory focus on studying the *nature* and *consequences* of social structures. Structural-functional sociologists refer to the positive (beneficial) consequences of social structures as **functions** and to the negative (harmful) consequences of social structures as **dysfunctions**. They also draw a distinction between **manifest** (recognized and intended) consequences and **latent**

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

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

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

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

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

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Team sports offer a graphic metaphor of social structure. Each person on the team occupies a different status, and each plays a relatively unique role. Structural functionalists focus on the benefits that these statuses and roles and the institution of sports itself provide to society.

(unrecognized and unintended) consequences. Because these concepts are very useful, they are also used by other sociologists who do not share the underlying assumptions behind structural-functional theory.

Consider, for example, the concept of the "*battered-woman syndrome.*" This is a medical diagnosis that suggests a woman who is repeatedly battered will become mentally ill. This diagnosis has been used in courts as a legal defense by battered women who assault or kill their abusers, allowing them to plead not guilty by reason of temporary insanity.

What are the consequences of this new social structure (that is, this new diagnosis)? Its *manifest function* (intended positive outcome) is, of course, to give legal recognition to the devastating psychological consequences of domestic violence. The *manifest dysfunction* is that some women might use the diagnosis as an excuse for a malicious, premeditated assault. A *latent dysfunction* is that women who are acquitted of legal charges on the basis of a temporary insanity plea could lose custody of their children, given the stigma attached to mental illness.

Another latent outcome may be the perpetuation of the view that women are irrational—that they stay with men who beat them because they are incapable of logically thinking through their options, and that they only leave when they "snap" mentally. But is this a function or a dysfunction? Remember that structural-functional analysis typically starts from the assumption that any social action or structure that contributes to the maintenance of society and preserves the status quo is functional and that any action or structure that challenges the status quo is dysfunctional. Because perpetuating the view that women are irrational would reinforce existing gender roles, this would be judged a latent *function*, not a dysfunction (Table 1.1).

As this example suggests, a social pattern that contributes to the maintenance of society may benefit some groups more than others. A pattern may be functional—that is, it may help maintain the status quo—without being either desirable or equitable. In general, however, structural-functionalists emphasize how social structures work together to create a society that runs smoothly.

TABLE 1.1 A Structural-Functional Analysis of the Battered-Woman Syndrome
Structural-functional analysis examines the intended and unintended consequences of social structures. It also assesses whether the consequences are positive (functional) or negative (dysfunctional). There is no moral dimension to the assessment that an outcome is positive; it merely means that the outcome contributes to the stability of society.

	Manifest	Latent
Function	Gives legal recognition to the psychological consequences of domestic violence.	Encourages the view that women are irrational.
Dysfunction	May serve as an excuse for violence against abusers.	Makes it more difficult for victims of domestic violence to retain custody of children.

Conflict Theory

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

Assumptions behind Conflict Theory

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

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

Using Conflict Theory

Like structural functionalists, conflict theorists are interested in social structures. However, conflict theorists focus on studying which groups benefit most from existing social structures and how these groups maintain their privileged positions.

A conflict analysis of domestic violence, for example, would begin by noting that women are battered far more often and far more severely than are men, and that the popular term *domestic violence* hides this reality. Conflict theorists' answer to the question "Who benefits?" is that battering helps men to retain their dominance over women. These theorists go on to ask how this situation developed and how it is maintained. Their answers would focus on issues such as how some religions traditionally have taught women to submit to their husbands' wishes and to accept violence within marriage, how until recently the law did not regard woman battering as a crime, and how some police officers still consider battering merely an unimportant family matter.

sociology and you

Whether or not you attended a senior prom in high school, you probably recognize some of the functions they serve. If you attended, you may have felt that your prom memories would help preserve your bonds with your high school friends. You also may have felt that the prom was a rite of passage, signaling that you were becoming an adult. Similarly, your parents' decisions regarding whether or not to let you attend unsupervised after-prom events functioned as a signal of their faith—or lack of faith—in your ability to behave responsibly. If you did not attend, on the other hand, you might have concluded that proms serve primarily to highlight who is most popular and who can afford the most expensive clothes and cars.

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

Conflict theorists point out that unions exist because labor and management have different, competing interests. Workers want better pay and secure jobs; management wants to keep costs down.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Both structural-functional and conflict theories focus on social structures and the relationships among them. But what does this tell us about the relationship between *individuals* and social structures? Sociologists who focus on the ways that individuals relate to and are affected by social structures often use symbolic interaction theory. **Symbolic interaction theory** (or *symbolic interactionism*) addresses the subjective meanings of human acts and the processes through which we come to develop and share these subjective meanings. The theory is so named because it studies the symbolic (or subjective) meaning of human interaction. Symbolic interaction theory is the newest of the three theoretical traditions described in this chapter.

Assumptions behind Symbolic Interaction Theory

When symbolic interactionists study human behavior, they begin with three major premises (Charon 2006):

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

Using Symbolic Interaction Theory

These three premises direct symbolic interactionists to study how relationships and social structures shape individuals. For example, symbolic interactionists interested in violence against women have researched how boys learn to consider aggression a natural part of being male when they are cheered for hitting others during hockey games, when dads tell them to fight anyone who makes fun of them, when older brothers physically push them around, and the like. Symbolic interactionists also have explored how teachers unintentionally reinforce the idea that girls are inferior by allowing boys to take over schoolyards and to make fun of girls in the classroom. All these experiences, some researchers believe, set the stage for later violence against women.

Symbolic interactionists are also interested in how individuals actively modify and negotiate relationships. Why do two children raised in the same family turn out differently? In part, because each child experiences subtly different relationships and situations even within the same family, and each may derive different meanings from those experiences.

Most generally, symbolic interactionists often focus on how relationships shape individuals, from childhood through old age. The strength of symbolic interactionism is that it focuses attention on how larger social structures affect our everyday lives, sense of self, and interpersonal relationships and encounters.

Interchangeable Lenses

Neither symbolic interaction theory, conflict theory, nor structural-functional theory is complete in itself. Together, however, they provide a valuable set of tools for understanding the relationship between the individual and society. These three theories can be regarded as interchangeable lenses through which society may be viewed. Just as a telephoto lens is not always superior to a wide-angle lens, one sociological theory will not always be superior to another.

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

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Conflict theorists typically view prostitution as an outgrowth of poverty and sexism; structural functionalists consider it functional for society. Symbolic interactionists ask questions such as how do prostitutes (such as these young women at a legal brothel in Nevada) maintain a positive identity in a stigmatized occupation?

Occasionally, the same subject can be viewed through any of these perspectives. We will generally get better pictures, however, by selecting the theoretical perspective that is best suited to the particular subject. In general, structural functionalism and conflict theory are well suited to the study of social structures, or **macrosociology**. Symbolic interactionism is well suited to the study of the relationship between individual meanings and social structures, or **microsociology**. The following sections provide three "snapshots" of female prostitution taken through the theoretical lens of structural-functional, conflict, and symbolic interaction theory.

Structural-Functional Theory: The Functions of Prostitution

Structural-functionalists who study female prostitution often begin by examining its social structure and identifying patterns of relationships among pimps, prostitutes, and customers. Then they focus on identifying the consequences of this social structure. In a still-famous article published in 1961, Kingsley Davis listed the following functions of prostitution:

- It provides a sexual outlet for poor and disabled men who cannot compete in the marriage market.
- It provides a sexual outlet for businessmen, sailors, and others when away from home.
- It provides a sexual outlet for those with unusual sexual tastes.

Provision of these services is the manifest or intended function of prostitution. Davis goes on to note that, by providing these services, prostitution has the latent function of protecting the institution of marriage from malcontents who, for one reason or another, do not receive adequate sexual service through marriage. Prostitution is the safety valve that makes it possible to restrict respectable sexual relationships (and hence childbearing and child rearing) to marital relationships, while still allowing for the variability of human sexual appetites.

Conflict Theory: Unequal Resources and Becoming a Prostitute

Conflict theorists analyze prostitution as part of the larger problem of unequal access to resources. Women, they argue, have not had equal access to economic opportunity.

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

Microsociology focuses on interactions among individuals.

In some societies, they cannot legally own property; in others, they suffer substantial discrimination in opportunities to work and earn. Because of this inability to support themselves, women have had to rely on economic support from men. They get this support by exchanging the one scarce resource they have to offer: sexual availability. To a conflict theorist, it makes little difference whether a woman barters her sexual availability through prostitution or through marriage. The underlying cause is the same.

Conflict theory is particularly useful for explaining why so many runaway boys and girls work as prostitutes. These young people have few realistic opportunities to support themselves by regular jobs: Many are not old enough to work legally and, in any case, would be unable to support themselves adequately on the minimum wage. Their young bodies are their most marketable resource.

Symbolic Interaction Theory: How Prostitutes Maintain Their Self-Concepts

Symbolic interactionists who examine prostitution take an entirely different perspective. They want to know, for example, how prostitutes learn the trade and how they manage their self-concept so that they continue to think positively of themselves despite their work. For one such study, sociologist Wendy Chapkis (1997) interviewed more than fifty women "sex workers"—prostitutes, call girls, actresses in "adult" films, and others. Many of the women she interviewed felt proud of their work. They felt that the services they offered were not substantially different from those offered by day-care workers or psychotherapists, who are also expected to provide services while acting as if they like and care for their clients. Chapkis found that as long as prostitutes are able to keep a healthy distance between their emotions and their work, they can maintain their self-esteem and mental health. As one woman described it: "Sex work hasn't all been a bed of roses and I've learned some painful things. But I also feel strong in what I do. I'm good at it and I know how to maintain my emotional distance. Just like if you are a fire fighter or a brain surgeon or a psychiatrist, you have to deal with some heavy stuff and that means divorcing yourself from your feelings on a certain level. You just have to be able to do that to do your job" (Chapkis, 79).

As these examples illustrate, many topics can be studied fruitfully with any of the three theoretical perspectives. Each sociologist must decide which perspective will work best for a given research project.

Researching Society

The things that sociologists study—for example, drug use, marital happiness, and poverty—have probably interested you for a long time. You may have developed your own opinions about why some people have good marriages and some have bad marriages or why some people break the law and others do not. Sociology is an academic discipline that critically examines commonsense explanations of human social behavior. It aims to improve our understanding of the social world by observing and measuring what actually happens. Obviously sociological research is not the only means of acquiring knowledge. Some people learn what they need to know from the Bible or the Koran or the Book of Mormon. Others get their answers from their parents, television, or the Internet. When you ask such people, "But how do you know that that is true?" their answer is simple: "My mother told me," "I heard it on *The Daily Show*," or "I read it on Wikipedia."

Sociology differs from these other ways of knowing in that it requires empirical evidence that can be confirmed by the normal human senses. We must be able to see, hear, smell, or feel it. Before social scientists would agree that they "knew" religious intermarriage increased the likelihood of divorce, for example, they would want to see evidence.

All research has two major goals: accurate description and accurate explanation. In sociology, we first seek accurate descriptions of human interactions (How many people marry and whom do they marry? Which people are mostly likely to abuse their children or to flunk out of school?). Then we try to explain those patterns (Why do people marry, abuse their children, or flunk out?).

The Research Process

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

Step One: Stating the Problem

The first step in the research process is carefully stating the issue to be investigated. We may select a topic because of a personal experience or out of commonsense observation. For example, we may have observed that African Americans appear more likely to experience unemployment and poverty than do white Americans. Alternatively, we might begin with a theory that predicts, for instance, that African Americans will have higher unemployment and poverty rates than white Americans because they experienced discrimination in schools and in workplaces. In either case, we begin by reviewing the research of other scholars to help us specify exactly what it is that we want to know. If a good deal of research has already been conducted on the issue and good theoretical explanations have been advanced for some of the patterns, then a problem may be stated in the form of a **hypothesis**—a statement about relationships that we expect to observe if our theory is correct. A hypothesis must be testable; that is, there must be some way in which data can help weed out a wrong conclusion and identify a correct one. For example, the *belief* that whites *deserve* better jobs than African Americans cannot be tested, but the *hypothesis* that whites receive better job offers than African Americans can be tested.

Step Two: Setting the Stage

Before we can begin to gather data, we first have to set the stage by selecting variables, defining our terms, and deciding exactly which people (or objects) we will study.

Understanding Variables

To narrow the scope of a problem to manageable size, researchers focus on variables rather than on people. **Variables** are measured characteristics that vary from one individual, situation, or group to the next (Babbie 2010). If we wish to analyze differences in rates of African American/white unemployment, we need information on two variables: race and unemployment. The individuals included in our study would

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

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

be complex and interesting human beings, but for our purposes, we would be interested only in these two aspects of each person's life.

When we hypothesize a cause-and-effect relationship between two variables, the cause is called the **independent variable**, and the effect is called the **dependent variable**. In our example, race is the independent variable, and unemployment is the dependent variable; that is, we hypothesize that unemployment *depends on* one's race.

Defining Variables

In order to describe a pattern or test a hypothesis, each variable must be precisely defined. Before we can describe racial differences in unemployment rates, for instance, we need to be able to decide whether an individual is unemployed. The process of deciding exactly how to measure a given variable is called **operationalizing**, and the exact definition we use to operationalize a variable is its **operational definition**. Reaching general agreement about these definitions may pose a problem. For instance, the U.S. government labels people as unemployed if they are actively seeking work but cannot find it. This definition ignores all the people who became so discouraged in their search for work that they simply gave up. Obviously, including discouraged workers in our definition of the unemployed might lead to a different description of patterns of unemployment.

Sampling

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

Sampling involves two processes: (1) obtaining a list of the population you want to study and (2) selecting a representative subset or sample from the list. The best samples are **random samples**. In a random sample, cases are chosen through a random procedure, such as tossing a coin, ensuring that every individual within a given population has an equal chance of being selected for the sample.

Once we have a list of the population, randomly selecting a sample is fairly easy. But getting such a list can be difficult or even impossible. A central principle of sampling is that a sample is only representative of the list from which it is drawn. If we draw a list of people from the telephone directory, then our sample can only be said to describe households listed in the directory; it will omit those with unlisted numbers, those with no telephones, those who use only cell phones, and those who have moved since the directory was issued. The best surveys begin with a list of all the households, individuals, or telephone numbers in a target region or group.

Step Three: Gathering Data

There are many ways of gathering sociological data, including running experiments, conducting surveys, and observing groups in action. Because this is a complex subject, we explore it in more detail later in this chapter.

Step Four: Finding Patterns

The fourth step in the research process is to look for patterns in the data. If we study unemployment, for example, we will find that African Americans are twice as likely as white Americans to be unemployed (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a). This finding is a **correlation**: an empirical relationship between two variables—in this case, race and employment.

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

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

Operationalizing refers to the process of deciding exactly how to measure a given variable.

An **operational definition** describes the exact procedure by which a variable is measured.

Sampling is the process of systematically selecting representative cases from the larger population.

Random samples are samples chosen through a random procedure, so that each individual in a given population has an equal chance of being selected.

Correlation exists when there is an empirical relationship between two variables (for example, income increases when education increases).

Step Five: Generating Theories

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

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

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

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

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

A study by Lori Reid (2002) tests this hypothesis for black women. Reid asked whether educational deficits explained why African American women are more likely to lose their

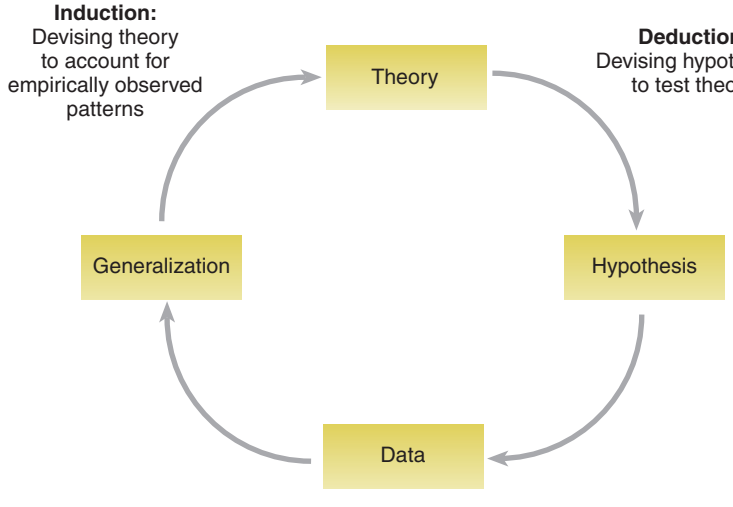


FIGURE 1.2 The Wheel of Science
The process of science can be viewed as a continuously turning wheel that moves us from data to theory and back again.

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

jobs than are whites. She found that education does play a small role. However, other factors—including black women's segregation in vulnerable occupations and residence in areas where unemployment was rising—were far better predictors of unemployment.

Reid's findings could be the basis for revised theories. These new theories would again be subject to empirical testing, and the process would begin anew. In the language of science, the process of moving from data to theory is called **induction**, and the process of moving from theory to data is called **deduction**. Figure 1.2 illustrates these two processes.

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

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

Research Methods

The theories and findings reported in this book stem from a variety of research methods. This section reviews the most common methods (summarized in the Concept Summary on Comparing Research Methods) and illustrates their advantages and disadvantages, using research on alcohol use as an example.

concept summary

Comparing Research Methods

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Experiments	Excellent for studying cause-and-effect relationships.	Based on small, nonrepresentative samples examined under highly artificial circumstances. Many subjects cannot be ethically studied through experiments.
Surveys	Very versatile—can study anything that we can ask about; can be done with large, random samples so that results represent many people; good for studying incidence, trends, and differentials.	Subject to social-desirability bias. Better for studying individuals than for studying social contexts, processes, or meaning.
Participant Observation	Places behaviors and attitudes in context. Shows what people do rather than what they say they do.	Limited to small, nonrepresentative samples. Relies on interpretation by single researcher.
Content Analysis	Inexpensive. Useful for historical research. Researcher does not affect data.	Only useful with recorded communications. Relies on researchers' interpretations, but multiple researchers can compare their conclusions.
Use of Existing Statistics	Inexpensive. Useful for historical research. Researcher does not affect data.	Limited to available data: cannot collect data to fit research questions.

Experiments

The **experiment** is a research method in which the researcher manipulates the independent variable to test theories of cause and effect. In the classic experiment, a researcher compares an **experimental group** to a **control group**. The only difference between the two groups is that only the former is exposed to the independent variable under study. If the groups are otherwise the same, comparing them should show whether the independent variable has an effect.

If we wanted to assess whether alcohol use affects grades, for example, we would need to compare an experimental group that drank alcohol with a control group that did not. We would begin by dividing a group of students randomly into two groups. If the initial pool is large enough, we could assume that the two groups are probably similar on nearly everything. For example, both groups probably contain an equal mix of good and poor students and of lazy and ambitious students. We could then ask the control group to agree not to drink alcohol for 5 weeks and ask the experimental group to drink daily during the same period. At the end of the 5 weeks, we would compare the grades of the two groups. Since the groups were similar at the start, if grades went up among the nondrinkers, we could conclude that abstaining from alcohol caused their grades to rise.

As this example suggests, experiments are a great way to test hypotheses about cause and effect. They have three drawbacks, however. First, experiments are unethical if they expose subjects to harm. For example, requiring students to drink daily might lower their course grades or turn them into heavy drinkers. Second, subjects often behave differently when they are in an experiment. For example, although alcohol consumption might normally lower student grades, the participants in our experiment might work extra hard to keep their grades up because they know we are collecting data on them. Finally, experiments occur in very unnatural environments, and so it is difficult to generalize from experiments to the real world.

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

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

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

Surveys

In **survey research**, the researcher asks a relatively large number of people the same set of standardized questions. These questions may be asked in a personal interview, over the telephone, online, or in a paper-and-pencil format. Because survey researchers ask many people the same questions, they can ascertain how common a behavior or pattern is (**incidence**), how the behavior or pattern has changed over time (**trend**), and how it varies from group to group (**differential**). Thus, survey data on alcohol use may allow us to say such things as the following: 80 percent of the undergraduates at Midwestern State currently use alcohol (incidence); the proportion using alcohol has remained about the same over the last 10 years (trend); and the proportion using alcohol is higher for males than for females (differential). Survey research is extremely versatile; it can be used to study attitudes, behavior, ideals, and values. If you can think of a way to ask a question about a topic, then you can study the topic with survey research.

Most researchers employing surveys in their work use a **cross-sectional design** for their research: They take a sample (or cross section) of the population at a single point in time and look at how groups differ on the independent and dependent variables. Thus, to study the potential impact of alcohol use on grades, we might begin with a sample of students and then divide them into groups according to how often they drank alcohol. We could then compare these groups to see which earn the higher grades.

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

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

A **trend** is a change in a variable over time.

A **differential** is a difference in the incidence of a phenomenon across social groups.

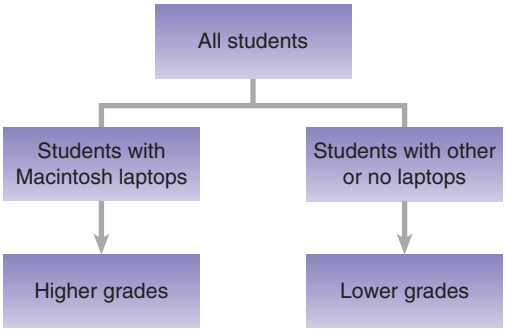
A **cross-sectional design** uses a sample (or cross section) of the population at a single point in time.

concept summary

Understanding Spurious Relationships

If we divide students into those who do and those who don't own Macintosh laptops, we find that, on average, those who own Macs have higher grades. This does not necessarily mean that owning a Mac *causes* higher grades. In the example below, the relationship between Macs and grades is *spurious*.

Spurious relationship: Owning a Mac seems (falsely) to lead to higher grades.



Nonspurious (true) relationship: Students who come from wealthier families are more likely to own Macintosh laptops and more likely to get higher grades. Wealth, not Mac ownership, causes higher grades.

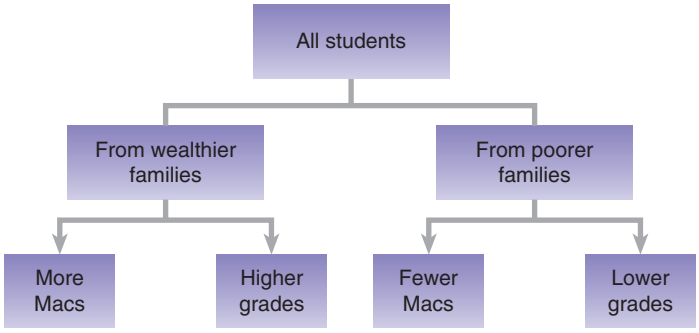
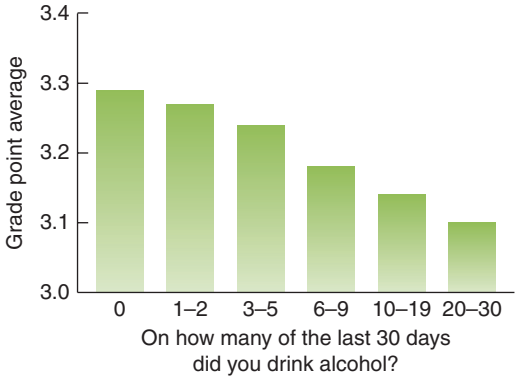


FIGURE 1.3 College Grades and Frequency of Alcohol Use
These data show that the more often a student drinks alcohol, the lower grades he or she is likely to earn. The data cannot tell us, however, whether drinking *caused* lower grades.
SOURCE: Boynton Health Service (2007).



In 2007, researchers in Minnesota did just that (Boynton Health Service 2007). They surveyed more than 24,000 undergraduates and then divided them according to how often they drank. Figure 1.3 shows the results: As alcohol use goes up, grades steadily (if slightly) go down.

Does this mean that drinking caused these students to get lower grades? Not necessarily. First, all we know is that the more frequently students drank, the lower their grades were. We cannot tell which is the cause and which is the effect: Did drinking cause students to get lower grades, or did getting lower grades lead students to drink? To sort this out, we would need to use **longitudinal research**, that is, to collect data over a period of time. We could either interview the same group of individuals multiple times (perhaps every month, perhaps every 5 years) or interview different groups, each randomly selected from the same population but weeks, months, or years apart. That way we could see whether students' grades began falling before or after their drinking increased.

A second problem is that we cannot be sure there is *any* cause-and-effect relationship between drinking and grades. Most likely nondrinkers and frequent drinkers differed in many ways from the start. The frequent drinkers may have been under more stress or may have grown up in neighborhoods where education was less valued. One of these variables might have caused them both to drink *and* to get lower grades. In this case, the apparent (but false) cause-and-effect relationship between drinking and lower grades would be considered a **spurious relationship**. A relationship between two variables (like drinking and grade point average) is considered *spurious* when it appears that one variable is affecting another, but in reality a third variable is affecting the first two variables. The Concept Summary on Understanding Spurious Relationships illustrates this idea.

Longitudinal research is any research in which data are collected over a long period of time.

A **spurious relationship** exists when one variable *seems* to cause changes in a second variable, but a third variable is the *real* cause of the change.

Survey research is an excellent way of finding the relationship between two variables, such as whether drinking affects grades among college students.

To avoid being misled by a spurious relationship, we would need to use a sample large enough to allow us to test for the effects of other possible variables. For example, instead of only comparing the grade point average of drinkers versus nondrinkers, we would compare the grades of four groups: (1) drinkers under stress, (2) drinkers not under stress, (3) nondrinkers under stress, and (4) nondrinkers who were not under stress.

As our example suggests, if we really want to understand what is going on in survey research, we need to use large, longitudinal surveys. But collecting such data is very expensive, and few sociologists can afford the costs on their own. Instead, many turn to government agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau or to nonprofit organizations such as the National Opinion Research Center, which each year collects vast amounts of data from a random sample of the U.S. population for its General Social Survey (GSS);

This is the strategy sociologist Robert Crosnoe (2006) used to understand alcohol use among adolescents. He based his research on longitudinal data collected by the federal government from almost 12,000 middle and high school students. Because the data covered multiple years, Crosnoe could tell that students tended to begin drinking after their grades went down rather than the drinking preceding the low grades. And because the study was so large, he could divide the students according to many different variables and be sure that failing grades really had affected students' alcohol use, rather than some other factor leading students to have both lower grades and higher drinking levels.

But regardless of the size or time frame of a survey, an important drawback of this technique is that respondents may misrepresent the truth. Both frequent drinkers *and* nondrinkers may lie about their habits because they fear others will look down on them. Sociologists refer to such misrepresentation as **social-desirability bias**—the tendency for people to color the truth so that they appear to be nicer, richer, and generally more desirable than they really are. Decoding the Data: Alcohol Use among Full-Time Students on the next page provides data on this topic from a large national survey. The data suggest that underage drinking—including heavy drinking—is quite common (although we need to consider whether social desirability bias might have affected the data).

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

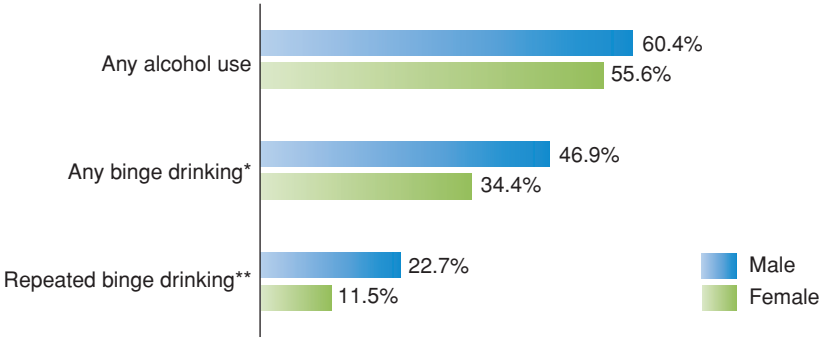
decoding the data

Examining the Data: Can you think of a sociological explanation for why young men are more likely than young women to drink alcohol and to drink heavily? Are girls and boys taught different messages about drinking? about drinkers? How? By whom? Do the dangers of drinking and heavy drinking differ for men and women? How might this affect their levels of drinking?

Critiquing the Data: Might these data overstate the differences between men and women's drinking habits? Might men overestimate their drinking or women underestimate their drinking? Why?

Alcohol Use During Last 30 days, among Full-Time College Students Aged 18 to 20

SOURCE: The NSDUH Report (2006).



*Five or more drinks on the same occasion
**Five or more drinks on five or more days

As this example suggests, survey research is not the best strategy for studying hidden or socially unacceptable behaviors. Nor is it a good strategy for examining ideas and feelings that cannot easily be reduced to questionnaire form. Finally, survey research studies individuals outside of their normal contexts. If we want to understand the situations and social contexts in which individuals drink, we must turn instead to participant observation.

Participant Observation

Participant observation refers to research conducted "in the field" by researchers who participate in their subjects' daily life, observe daily life, or interview people in-depth about their lives. This method is particularly useful for discovering patterns of interaction and learning the meaning those patterns hold for individuals. Unlike survey researchers, who ask people about what they do or believe, participant-observers aim to *see* what people are actually doing. Participant observation is used most often by symbolic interactionists—that is, by researchers who want to understand subjective meanings, personal relationships, and the process of social life.

The three major techniques involved in participant observation are interviewing, participating, and observing. A researcher goes to the scene of the action, where she may interview people informally in the normal course of conversation, participate in whatever they are doing, observe the activities of other participants, or do all three. Researchers decide which of these techniques to use based on both intellectual and practical criteria. A participant observer studying alcohol use on campus, for example, would not need to get "smashed" every night. She would, however, probably do long, informal interviews with both users and nonusers, attend student parties and activities, and attempt to get a feel for how alcohol use fits in with certain student subcultures.

In some cases, participant observation is the only reasonable way to approach a subject. This is especially likely when we are examining behaviors that break normal social rules or groups that fall outside the mainstream of society. For example, if

Participant observation refers to conducting research by participating, interviewing, and observing "in the field."

Participant observation is the best—and perhaps only—way to study highly stigmatized behaviors such as injecting illegal drugs.

fraternity members are asked to indicate on a survey how often they black out after drinking, they may not give an honest answer—or may not even remember the correct answer. If, on the other hand, we observe fraternity parties on campus, we may get a more accurate view of how often students black out. And if we spend weeks or months observing a fraternity and building trust, we will likely get more honest answers when we do choose to interview members.

Similarly, participant observation is often the only way to obtain information about groups that are truly outside the mainstream. If we wanted to study college students' drinking, we could mail out surveys and expect that at least some would reply. But how could we mail surveys to homeless alcoholics? And why would they reply, even if we could find them? For this reason, participant observation is often our best source of information about groups such as topless dancers, illegal drug users, and neo-Nazi skinheads.

On the other hand, a major disadvantage of participant observation is that it is usually based on small numbers of individuals who have not been selected randomly. The data tend to be unsystematic and the samples not very representative. However, we do learn a great deal about the few individuals involved. This information can help us to generate ideas that we can examine more systematically with other techniques. For this reason, researchers often use participant observation as the initial step in exploring a research topic.

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

Focus on American Diversity: Studying Life in "The Projects" on the next page illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of using participant observation to study life in poor, African American communities.

Replication is the repetition of empirical studies by another researcher or with different samples to see if the same results occur.

focus on  AMERICAN DIVERSITY

Studying Life in "The Projects"

What is life like for extremely poor African Americans who live in segregated housing projects? Initially, sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh—then a graduate student—thought he could answer this question using standardized survey questions, including "How does it feel to be black and poor? Very bad, somewhat bad, neither bad nor good, somewhat good, or very good." He soon learned that such questions were useless at best: Some simply laughed at the questions, some responded with brief or misleading answers, and some concluded that he must be working for the police. As a result, Venkatesh realized that the only way to learn about life in the projects was to listen and watch. He did so for almost a decade, spending much of his time with members of the Black Kings street gang.

Venkatesh's research (2000, 2008, 2009) allowed him to document the extreme isolation and hardship experienced by project residents. Although the projects were owned by the city of Chicago, the residents received almost no services. Many apartments lacked running water or electricity, and many buildings had only black holes where elevators once ran. The police rarely ventured into the buildings, and emergency services rarely responded when anyone dialed 911. As a result, street gangs served as quasi-governments. Building residents relied on the gangs to discipline (that is, to beat) anyone who battered a woman, robbed a resident, or (under the influence of drugs) behaved so crazily in building lobbies that they scared residents or visitors. In exchange, the gang leaders received free rein to sell drugs and to demand "protection money" from area businesspeople, whether prostitutes or grocery store owners.

At the same time, Venkatesh found, the residents showed great ingenuity in finding ways to survive in the midst of incredible hardship. For example, one group of five families survived by pooling the resources of their five apartments: one with a working stove, one with working heat, one with running water, and so on. Others augmented their small incomes with a wide variety of off-the-record home businesses, from baking pies to fixing cars to selling lottery tickets.

Venkatesh's participant observation allowed him a view into life in America's ghettoes that could not have been obtained through any other methods. At the same time, his experiences illustrate the pitfalls of participant research. Early on, he realized that so long as he "hung out" with gang members, nonmembers would not fully trust him. But if he spent time with *non*members, the gang members wouldn't trust him—and might also make it dangerous for him to visit the projects. Moreover, because he spent so much time with the gang, he naturally found that he sometimes saw the world at least partially through the gang members' eyes. Finally, because it was unsafe for him to wander around the projects on his own, he was initially only able to see what others wanted him to see. Because Venkatesh spent so many years conducting his research, however, he eventually was able to view the situation from all sides and to paint a thorough—and fascinating—picture of life in the projects.

REUTERS/Scott Olson

In the housing project studied by Sudhir Venkatesh, the external hallways that link the apartments look more like prison cells than like balconies.

Content Analysis

So far, all the methods we've discussed rely on observing or interviewing people. In other cases, however, sociologists focus their research not on people but on the documents that people produce. **Content analysis** refers to the systematic examination of documents of any sort.

Sociologists who use content analysis follow essentially the same procedures as those who conduct surveys. But instead of taking a sample of individuals and then asking them a list of questions, sociologists who use content analysis take a sample of *documents* and then systematically ask questions about those documents. For example, to explore how rap music portrays alcohol use, researcher Denise Herd (2005) first identified the most popular rap songs over an 18-year period. She then chose a random sample of 341 songs, read the lyrics for each song, and systematically noted

Content analysis refers to the systematic examination of documents of any sort.

whether the song mentioned alcohol and whether it linked alcohol to positive effects (like glamour or wealth) or to negative effects (like losing a girlfriend or going to jail). Herd found that rap music mentioned alcohol use more often over time and that the songs typically mentioned only alcohol's positive consequences.

Researchers can use content analysis with any type of written document: court transcripts, diaries, student papers, and so on. They can also use it with electronic "documents" such as blogs, web pages, and public comments emailed to politicians and archived online for anyone to view. In addition, sociologists may analyze not only a document's text but also its images—exploring, for example, how alcohol use is portrayed on billboards, in magazines, online, or on television.

A main advantage of content analysis is that it can be quite inexpensive: no one need spend months in the field collecting observations or spend days going door-to-door asking people to answer surveys. In addition, content analysis can be used with historical as well as contemporary documents. We could, for example, analyze the last 30 years of alcohol ads to see how the portrayal of alcohol has changed over time. Finally, because we are looking at existing documents, we cannot affect the data itself: A participant observer might affect how much the students he observes drink, but a sociologist conducting content analysis can't affect what appears in a magazine ad.

The obvious disadvantage of content analysis is that it can only be used with existing documents, and so will not work for some research topics. In addition, as with participant observation, it relies on researchers' interpretations of the data. However, with content analysis a team of researchers can look at the data and compare their conclusions, making it less likely that any one researcher's bias affects the results.

Using Existing Statistics

Regardless of which methods sociologists use, they often augment their data with existing statistics from other sources. Federal, local, and state governments provide a wealth of information to researchers, such as how house prices have changed over time, how life expectancy has risen or fallen, how cities have grown or shrunk in population, and so on. If we were studying alcohol use in a particular college, for example, we could obtain data from the U.S. Census on per capita alcohol consumption in the college's neighborhood. We could obtain data on alcohol-related car accidents from our state's Health or Motor Vehicles Department. Or we could obtain data on sexual assaults that might be linked to alcohol use from the college or local police department. We could use these data to provide a broader picture of the problem, or we could combine these data with the data we collected ourselves—exploring, for example, whether more sexual assaults occurred during years when students who answered our survey reported higher levels of drinking.

The advantages and disadvantages of using existing statistics are similar to those for content analysis. Since we are using existing data, the costs are low to nonexistent, and we can study the past as well as the present. The disadvantage is that we cannot collect data to fit our research questions but must instead rely on whatever data are available.

Sociologists: What Do They Do?

A degree in sociology can be the starting point to a successful career. Your particular career options, however, will vary depending on whether you also pursue graduate training in sociology.

Using a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology

Like other liberal arts majors, sociology provides students with the basic education needed for entry-level positions in many fields. In addition, sociology teaches students how to think critically, analyze data, and understand both social problems and human relationships. As a result, undergraduate sociology majors graduate with skills and knowledge that can serve them well in journalism, business, teaching, health care, and many other fields. In addition, undergraduate sociology training provides excellent grounding for graduate education in a variety of fields; Michelle Obama obtained an undergraduate degree in sociology before pursuing a law degree.

If you want to work as a sociologist, however, you will also need to obtain a graduate degree in sociology. For some jobs, a master's degree may be enough; for others, a Ph.D. is required.

Sociologists in Colleges and Universities

About three-quarters of U.S. sociologists with graduate degrees work as professors or lecturers in colleges and universities. At some schools, sociologists are solely expected to engage in teaching and to help with their school's administrative work. At others, they are expected to engage in both teaching and research.

Some sociology professors use their research to understand basic principles of human social behavior. Others focus more directly on addressing social problems such as violence, illness, and unemployment. For example, sociology professors who study disasters played crucial roles in helping the government, nonprofit organizations, and communities respond to the environmental damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. A particularly good example is University of New Orleans sociologist Shirley Laska, who had predicted New Orleans's vulnerability to hurricanes in a widely cited report published a year before the hurricane struck.

Sociologists in Government

Sociologists also find employment at all levels of government, from local to national. For example, sociologists at the U.S. Census Bureau measure changes in the population and help communities decide whether to build day-care centers or nursing homes. At the Department of Education, sociologists help policy makers decide whether schools should increase or decrease their use of standardized tests. And at local, state, and national health departments, sociologists have researched such topics as why students engage in unsafe sex during spring break and how schools can best encourage their students to adopt safer practices.

Sociologists in Business

Sociologists are employed in various positions in the business world. Some use their knowledge of human interaction to work in human relations departments or firms, especially with regard to issues of gender or ethnic diversity. Others work in market research. Sociologists can help businesses predict whether signing a movie star to blog about their product might increase sales or which features would help woo consumers from iPhones to a new smartphone. Sociologists' understanding of human behavior and of how to *research* human behavior are invaluable assets for those seeking positions of this type.

Sociologists in Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations range from hospitals and clinics to social-activist organizations and private think tanks; sociologists are employed in all these types of organizations. Sociologists at the American Foundation for AIDS Research, for example, have studied the causes of unsafe sexual activity and have evaluated the effectiveness of different strategies used to encourage condom use. They also have conducted the background research needed to convince communities to adopt more controversial approaches, such as distributing clean needles to addicts to prevent the transmission of HIV.

Although most sociologists work in research, a small but growing number work for nonprofits or on their own as marriage, family, or rehabilitation counselors. The training that sociologists receive is very different from that received by psychologists, social workers, and other counselors, but it can be very useful in helping individuals understand how their personal problems connect to broader social issues and social forces.

Sociologists Working to Serve the Public

Most sociologists are committed to a value-free approach to their work as scholars. Many, however, also dedicate themselves to changing society for the better, whether they work in government, business, nonprofit organizations, or academia. As a result, sociologists have served on a wide variety of public commissions and in public offices to encourage positive social change. They work for change independently, too, both as individuals and in organizations such as Sociologists without Borders (www.sociologistswithoutborders.org), which is committed to "advancing transnational solidarities and justice." Value-free scholarship does not have to mean value-free citizenship.

Where This Leaves Us

Sociology is a diverse and exciting field. From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, it has grown into a core social science that plays a central role in university education. Its three major perspectives—structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—provide a complementary set of lenses for viewing the world, while its varied methodological approaches supply the tools needed to study social life in all its complexity. These lenses and tools position sociologists not only to understand the world, but to help change it for the better.

Summary

1. Sociology is the systematic study of social behavior. Sociologists use the concepts of role and social structure to analyze common human dramas. When we use the *sociological imagination,* we focus on understanding how social structures affect individual behavior and personal troubles.
2. The rapid social change that followed the industrial revolution was an important inspiration for the development of sociology. Problems caused by rapid social change stimulated the demand for accurate information about social processes. This social-problems orientation remains an important aspect of sociology.
3. There are three major theoretical perspectives in sociology: structural-functional theory, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction theory. The three can be seen as alternative lenses through which to view society, with each having value as a tool for understanding how social structures shape human behavior.

4. Structural functionalism has its roots in evolutionary theory. It identifies social structures and analyzes their consequences for social harmony and stability. Identification of manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions is part of its analytic framework.
5. Conflict theory developed from Karl Marx's ideas about the importance of conflict and competition in structuring human behavior and social life. It analyzes social structures by asking who benefits from them and how these benefits are maintained. This theory assumes that competition is more important than consensus and that change is a positive result of conflict.
6. Symbolic interaction theory examines the subjective meanings of human interaction and the processes through which people come to develop and communicate shared symbolic meanings. Whereas structural functionalism and conflict theory emphasize macrosociology, symbolic interactionism focuses on microsociology.
7. Sociology is a social science. This means it relies on critical and systematic examination of the evidence before reaching any conclusions and that it approaches each research question from a position of neutrality. This is called value-free sociology.
8. The five steps in the research process are stating the problem, setting the stage, gathering the data, finding patterns, and generating theory. These steps form a continuous loop called the *wheel of science.* The movement from data to theory is called induction, and the movement from theory to hypothesis to data is called deduction.
9. Any research design must identify the variables under study, specify the precise operational definitions of these variables, and describe how a representative sample of cases for studying the variables will be obtained.
10. Experiments are excellent ways of testing cause-and-effect hypotheses. However, experiments measure behavior in highly artificial conditions, and individuals may behave differently when they are in experiments. In addition, experiments can sometimes expose subjects to harm.
11. In survey research, a researcher asks a large number of people a set of standard questions. This method is useful for describing incidence, trends, and differentials for random samples, but not as good for describing the contexts of human behavior or for establishing causal relationships.
12. Participant observation is a method in which the researcher observes or interviews in depth a small number of individuals. The method is an excellent source of fine detail about human interaction and its subjective meanings. However, it typically relies on nonrepresentative samples and on one researcher's interpretations of the data, unverified by other observers.
13. Content analysis refers to the systematic study of written documents, whether contemporary or historical. Its advantage is that it is inexpensive and that the researcher cannot bias the data itself. However, it can only be used with existing documents, and it relies on researchers' interpretations of the data.
14. Sociologists often base their research on existing statistics obtained from government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other sources. This inexpensive method permits the study of the past as well as the present, but can only be used when appropriate data is available.
15. Most sociologists teach and do research in academic settings. A growing minority is employed in government, nonprofit organizations, and business, where they do applied research. Regardless of the setting, sociological theory and research have implications for social policy.

Thinking Critically

1. Which of your own personal troubles might reasonably be reframed as public issues? Does such a reframing change the nature of the solutions you can see?
2. Consider how a structural-functional analysis of gender roles might differ from a conflict analysis. Would men be more or less likely than women to favor a structural-functionalist approach?
3. Can you think of situations in which a change of friends, living arrangements, or jobs has caused you to change your interpretations of a social issue (such as gay marriage, single motherhood, or unemployment benefits)?
4. Consider what study design you could ethically use to determine whether drinking alcohol, living in a sorority, or growing up with a single parent reduces academic performance.

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