



# 1

## The Sociological Perspective



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# Not For Sale

## What Is Sociology?

## The Sociological Perspective

## The Significance of Diversity

## The Development of Sociological Theory

## Theoretical Frameworks in Sociology

## Chapter Summary

**imagine that you** had been switched with another infant at birth. How different would your life be? What if your accidental family was very poor . . . or very rich? How might this have affected the schools you attended, the health care you received, the possibilities for your future career? If you had been raised in a different religion, would this have affected your beliefs, values, and attitudes? Taking a greater leap, what if you had been born another sex or a different race? What would you be like now?

We are talking about changing the basic facts of your life—your family, social class, education, religion, sex, and race. Each has major consequences for who you are and how you will fare in life. These factors play a major part in writing your life script. Social location (meaning a person's place in society) establishes the limits and possibilities of a life.

### Consider this:

- The pay gap between women and men, which had been declining since the 1980s, has recently *increased* between college-educated women and men (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).
- During the housing foreclosure crisis in the recent recession, women of color were five times more likely than men in the same income brackets to hold subprime mortgages—that is, mortgages with interest rates higher than the prime rate (Fishbein and Woodall 2006).

These conclusions, drawn from current sociological research, describe some consequences of particular social locations in society. Although we may take our place in society for granted, our social location has a profound effect on our chances in life. The power of sociology is that it teaches us to see how society influences our lives and

the lives of others, and it helps us explain the consequences of different social arrangements.

Sociology also has the power to help us understand the influence of major changes on people. Currently, rapidly developing technologies, increasing globalization, a more diverse population in the United States, and changes in women's roles are affecting everyone in society, although in different ways. How are these changes affecting your life? Perhaps you rely on a cell phone to keep in touch with friends, or maybe your community is witnessing an increase in immigrants from other places, or maybe you see women and men trying hard to balance the needs of both work and family life. All of these are issues that guide sociological questions. Sociology explains some of the causes and consequences of these changes.

Although society is always changing, it is also remarkably stable. People generally follow established patterns of human behavior, and you can generally anticipate how people will behave in certain situations. You can even anticipate how different social conditions will affect different groups of people in society. This is what sociologists find so interesting: *Society is marked by both change and stability*. Societies continually evolve, creating the need for people to adapt to change while still following generally established patterns of behavior.

#### APLIA ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY

#### Critical Thinking and the FPO

Critically evaluate general and vague statements generated from a personality analysis.

## WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

**Sociology** is the study of human behavior in society. Sociologists are interested in the study of people and have learned a fundamental lesson: *All human behavior occurs in a societal context*. That context—the institutions and culture that surround us—shapes what people do and think. In this book, we will examine the dimensions of society and analyze the elements of social context that influence human behavior.

Sociology is a scientific way of thinking about society and its influence on human groups. Observation, reasoning, and logical analysis are the tools of the sociologist, coupled with knowledge of the large body of theoretical and analytical work done by previous sociologists and others. Sociology is inspired by the fascination people have for the thoughts and actions of other people, but it goes far beyond casual observations. It attempts to build on observations that are objective and accurate to create analyses that are reliable and that can be validated by others.

Every day, the media in their various forms (television, film, video, digital, and print) bombard us with



Sociology is the study of human behavior, including the significance of diversity.

social commentary. Whether it is Oprah Winfrey or Jerry Springer, media commentators provide endless opinion about the various and sometimes bizarre forms of behavior in our society. Sociology is different. Sociologists may appear in the media, and they often study the same subjects that the media examine, such as domestic violence or juvenile delinquency, but sociologists use specific research techniques and well-tested theories to explain social issues. Indeed, sociology can provide the tools for testing whether the things we hear about society are actually true. Much of what we hear in the media and elsewhere about society, although delivered with perfect earnestness, is misstated and sometimes completely wrong, as you will see in some of the Debunking Society's Myths examples featured throughout this book.

## debunking SOCIETY'S MYTHS

**Q:** What do the following people have in common?

- Michelle Obama
- Robin Williams (actor, comedian)
- Ronald Reagan
- Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Debra Winger (actress)
- Regis Philbin (TV personality)
- Rev. Jesse Jackson
- Dr. Ruth Westheimer (the "sex doctor")
- Saul Bellow (novelist; Nobel Prize recipient)
- Joe Theismann (former football player)
- Congresswoman Maxine Waters (from California)
- Senator Barbara Mikulski (from Maryland)

**A:** They were all sociology majors!

Source: Compiled by Peter Dreier, Occidental College. ●



The subject matter of sociology is everywhere. This is why people sometimes wrongly believe that sociology just explains the obvious. But sociologists bring a unique perspective to understanding social behavior and social change. Even though sociologists often do research on familiar topics, such as youth cultures or relations between women and men—they do so using particular research tools and specific frames of analysis (known as sociological theory). Psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists, economists, social workers, and others also study social behavior, although each has a different perspective or “angle” on people in society. Together, these fields of study (also called disciplines) make up what are called the social sciences.

## THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Think back to the opening of this chapter where you were asked to imagine yourself growing up under completely different circumstances. Our goal in that passage was to make you feel the stirring of the *sociological perspective*—the ability to see the societal patterns that influence individual and group life. The beginnings of the sociological perspective can be as simple as the pleasures of watching people or wondering how society influences people’s lives. Indeed, many students begin their study of sociology because they are “interested in people.” Sociologists convert this curiosity into the systematic study of how society influences different people’s experiences within it.

**C. Wright Mills** (1916–1962) was one of the first to write about the sociological perspective in his classic book, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). He wrote that the task of sociology was to understand the relationship between individuals and the society in which they live. He defined the **sociological imagination** as the ability to see the societal patterns that influence the individual as well as groups of individuals. Sociology should be used, Mills argued, to reveal how the context of society shapes our lives. He thought that to understand the experience of a given person or group of people, one had to have knowledge of the social and historical context in which people lived.

Think, for example, about the time and effort that many people put into their appearance. You might ordinarily think of this as merely personal grooming or an individual attempt to “look good,” but there are significant social origins of this behavior. When you stand in front of the mirror, you are probably not thinking about how society is present in your reflection. But as you look in the mirror, you are seeing how others see you and are very likely adjusting your appearance with that in mind, even if not consciously. Therefore, this seemingly individual behavior is actually a very social act. If you are trying to achieve a particular look, you are likely doing so because of social forces that establish

particular ideals, which are produced by industries that profit enormously from the products and services that people buy, even when they do so believing this is an individual choice.

Some industries suggest that you should be thinner or curvier, your pants should be baggy or straight, your breasts should be minimized or maximized—either way you need more products. Maybe you should have a complete makeover! Many people go to great lengths to try to achieve a constantly changing beauty ideal, one that is probably not even attainable (such as flawless skin, hair never out of place, perfectly proportioned body parts). Sometimes trying to meet these ideals can even be hazardous to your physical and mental health.

The point is that the alleged standards of beauty are produced by social factors that extend far beyond an individual’s concerns with personal appearance. Beauty ideals, like other socially established beliefs and practices, are produced in particular social and historical contexts. People may come up with all kinds of personal strategies for achieving these ideals: They may buy more products, try to lose more weight, get a Botox treatment, or even become extremely depressed and anxious if they think their efforts are failing. These personal behaviors may seem to be only individual issues, but they have basic social causes. That is, the origins of these behaviors exist beyond personal lives. The sociological imagination permits us to see that something as seemingly personal as how you look arises from a social context, not just individual behavior.

Sociologists are certainly concerned about individuals, but they are attuned to the social and historical context that shapes the experiences of individuals and groups. A distinction made by the sociological imagination is that made between *troubles* and *issues*. **Troubles** are privately felt problems that spring from events or feelings in a person’s life. **Issues** affect large numbers of people and have their origins in the institutional arrangements and history of a society (Mills 1959). This distinction is the crux of the difference between individual experience and **social structure**, defined as the organized pattern of social relationships and social institutions that together constitute society. Issues shape the context within which troubles arise. Sociologists employ the sociological perspective to understand how issues are shaped by social structures.

### thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

#### Troubles and Issues

Personal troubles are everywhere around us: alcohol abuse or worries about money or even being upset about how you look. At the individual level, these things can be deeply troubling, and people sometimes need personal help to deal with them. But most personal troubles, as C. Wright Mills would say, also have their origins in societal arrangements. Take the example of alcohol abuse—or, perhaps, another personal trouble with which you are familiar.



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Personal troubles are felt by individuals who are experiencing problems; social issues arise when large numbers of people experience problems that are rooted in the social structure of society.

What are some of the things about society—not just individuals—that might influence this personal trouble? How does this help you understand the distinction that Mills makes between *personal troubles* and *social issues*? Then explain what Mills means by saying that personal biographies are linked to the structure of society. ●

Mills used the example of unemployment to explain the meaning of troubles versus issues—an example that has particular resonance now, given the economic recession the United States has experienced and the personal troubles (including unemployment) that this has generated. When an individual person becomes unemployed—or cannot find work—he or she has a personal trouble. Think of the worry that many college graduates have experienced in trying to find work during the recession. In addition to financial problems that unemployment brings, a person may feel a loss of identity, may become depressed, may have to uproot a family and move, or—in the case of college students—may have to move back home with parents after graduation.

The problem of unemployment, however, is deeper than the experience of one person. Unemployment is rooted in the structure of society; this is what interests sociologists. What societal forces cause unemployment? Who is most likely to become unemployed at different times? How does unemployment affect an entire community (for instance, when a large plant shuts down) or an entire nation (such as during the economic downturn of recent years)? Sociologists know that unemployment causes personal troubles, but understanding unemployment is more than understanding one person's experience. It requires understanding the social structural conditions that influence people's lives.

The specific task of sociology, according to Mills, is to comprehend the whole of human society—its personal and public dimensions, historical and contemporary—and its influence on the lives of human beings. Mills had an important point: People often feel that things are beyond their control, meaning that they are being shaped by social forces larger than their own individual lives. Social forces influence our lives in profound ways, even though we may not always know how. Consider this. Even though you were likely very young at the time, you most likely remember what you were doing on September 11, 2001, when you first heard that terrorists had flown planes into the World Trade Center in New York City. Obviously, this affected people's personal lives, but its impact and its causes go beyond the personal troubles it produced. The sociological perspective explains many dimensions of this event and its aftermath and how it might have affected an entire generation. Of course, the social forces that influence people's lives are not always that drastic and include the ordinary events of everyday life.

Sociology is an **empirical** discipline. This means that sociological conclusions are based on careful and systematic observations, as we will see in Chapter 3 on sociological research methods. In this way, sociology is very different from ordinary common sense. For empirical observations to be useful to other observers, they must be gathered and recorded rigorously. Sociologists are also obliged to reexamine their assumptions and conclusions constantly. Although the specific methods that sociologists use to examine different problems vary, as we will see, the empirical basis of sociology is what distinguishes it from mere opinion or other forms of social commentary.

## Discovering Unsettling Facts

In studying sociology, it is crucial to examine the most controversial topics and to do so with an open mind, even when you see the most disquieting facts. The facts we learn through sociological research can be “inconvenient” because the data can challenge familiar ways of thinking. Consider the following:

- Despite the widespread idea promoted in the media that well-educated women are opting out of professional careers to stay home and raise children, the proportion of college-educated White women who stay home with children has actually declined; those who do opt out do so more typically because of their frustrations with workplaces (Stone 2007).
- Same-sex couples are more likely to be interracial than are heterosexual couples (Rosenfeld and Kim 2005).
- The number of women prisoners has increased at almost twice the rate of increase for men; two-thirds of women and half of men in prison are parents (Sabol and Couture 2008; Glaze and Maruschak 2008).



These facts provide unsettling evidence of persistent problems in the United States, *problems that are embedded in society, not just in individual behavior*. Sociologists try to reveal the social factors that shape society and determine the chances of success for different groups. Some never get the chance to go to college; others are unlikely to ever go to jail. These divisions persist because of people's placement within society.

Sociologists study not just the disquieting side of society. Sociologists may study questions that affect everyday life, such as how young boys and men are affected by changing gender roles (Kimmel 2008), how children of immigrants fare (Park 2005), or the expectations that young women and men have for combining work and family life (Gerson 2010). There are also many intriguing studies of unusual groups, such as cyberspace users (Kendall 2002), strip club dancers (Barton 2006), or heavily tattooed people, known as collectors (Irwin 2001). The subject matter of sociology is vast. Some research illuminates odd corners of society; other studies address urgent problems of society that may affect the lives of millions.

## Debunking in Sociology

The power of sociological thinking is that it helps us see everyday life in new ways. Sociologists question actions and ideas that are usually taken for granted. Peter Berger (1963) calls this process debunking. **Debunking** refers to looking behind the facades of everyday life—what Berger called the “unmasking tendency” of sociology (1963: 38). In other words, sociologists look at the behind-the-scenes patterns and processes that shape the behavior they observe in the social world.

Take schooling, for example: We can see how the sociological perspective debunks common assumptions about education. Most people think that education is primarily a way to learn and get ahead. Although this is true, a sociological perspective on education reveals something more. Sociologists have concluded that more than learning takes place in schools; other social processes are at work. Social cliques are formed where some students are “insiders” and others are excluded “outsiders.” Young schoolchildren acquire not just formal knowledge but also the expectations of society and people's place within it. Race and class conflicts are often played out in schools (Lewis 2003). Relative to boys, girls are often shortchanged by the school system—receiving less attention and encouragement, less interaction with teachers, less instruction in the sciences, and many other deficits disproportionately forced upon them (American Association of University Women 1998; Sadker and Sadker 1994). Poor children seldom have the same resources in schools as middle-class or elite children, and they are often assumed to be incapable of doing schoolwork and are treated accordingly. The somber reality is that schools may actually

stifle the opportunities of some children rather than launch all children toward success.

Debunking is sometimes easier to do when looking at a culture or society different from one's own. Consider how behaviors that are unquestioned in one society may seem positively bizarre to an outsider. For a thousand years in China, it was usual for the elite classes to bind the feet of young girls to keep the feet from growing bigger—a practice allegedly derived from a mistress of the emperor. Bound feet were a sign of delicacy and vulnerability. A woman with large feet (defined as more than 4 inches long!) was thought to bring shame to her husband's household. The practice was supported by the belief that men were highly aroused by small feet,



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Cultural practices that seem bizarre to outsiders may be taken for granted or defined as appropriate by insiders.

# DOING **sociological research**

## Debunking the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood

**Research Question:** Sociologist Elaine Bell Kaplan knew that there was a stereotypical view of Black teen mothers, that they had grown up in fatherless households where their mothers had no moral values and no control over their children. The myth of Black teenage motherhood also depicts teen mothers as unable to control their sexuality, as having children to collect welfare checks, and as having families who condone their behavior. Is this true?

**Research Method:** Kaplan did extensive research in two communities in the San Francisco Bay Area—East Oakland and Richmond—both communities with a large African American population and typical of many inner-city, poor neighborhoods. Once thriving Black communities, East Oakland and Richmond are now characterized by high rates of unemployment, poverty, inadequate schools, crime, drug-related violence, and high numbers of single-parent households. Having grown up herself in Harlem, Kaplan knew that communities like those she studied have not always had these problems, nor have they condoned teen pregnancy. She spent several months in these communities, working as a volunteer in a community teen center that provided educational programs, day care, and counseling to teen parents,

and “hanging out” with a core group of teen mothers. She did extensive interviews with thirty-two teen mothers, supplementing them when she could with interviews with their mothers and, sometimes, the fathers of their children.

**Research Results:** Kaplan found that teen mothers adopt strategies for survival that help them cope with their environment, even though these same strategies do not help them overcome the problems they face. Unlike what the popular stereotype suggests, she did not find that the Black community condones teen pregnancy; quite the contrary, the teens felt embarrassed and stigmatized by being pregnant and experienced tension and conflict with their mothers, who saw their pregnancy as disrupting the hopes they had for their daughters’ success. These conclusions run directly counter to the public image that such women do not value success and live in a culture that promotes welfare dependency.

**Conclusions and Implications:** Instead of simply stereotyping these teens as young and tough, Kaplan sees them as struggling to develop their own gender and sexual identity. Like other teens, they are highly vulnerable, searching for love and aspiring to create a meaningful and

positive identity for themselves. But failed by the educational system and locked out of the job market, the young women’s struggle to develop an identity is compounded by the disruptive social and economic conditions in which they live.

Kaplan’s research is a fine example of how sociologists debunk some of the commonly shared myths that surround contemporary issues. Carefully placing her analysis in the context of the social structural changes that affect these young women’s lives, Kaplan provides an excellent example of how sociological research can shed new light on some of our most pressing social problems.

### Questions to Consider

1. Suppose that Kaplan had studied middle-class teen mothers. What similarities and differences would you predict in the experiences of middle-class and poor teen mothers? Does race matter? In what ways does your answer *debunk* myths about teen pregnancy?
2. Make a list of the challenges you would face were you to be a teen parent. Having done so, indicate those that would be considered personal troubles and those that are social issues. How are the two related?

Source: Kaplan, Elaine Bell. 1996. *Not Our Kind of Girl: Unraveling the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

even though men never actually saw the naked foot. If they had, they might have been repulsed, because a woman’s actual foot was U-shaped and often rotten and covered with dead skin (Blake 1994). Outside the social, cultural, and historical context in which it was practiced, footbinding seems bizarre, even dangerous. Feminists have pointed out that Chinese women were crippled by this practice, making them unable to move about freely and more dependent on men (Chang 1991).

This is an example of outsiders debunking a practice that was taken for granted by those within the culture. Debunking can also call into question practices in one’s own culture that may normally go unexamined. Strange as the practice of Chinese footbinding may seem to you, how might someone from another culture view wearing shoes that make it difficult to walk?

Or piercing one’s tongue or eyebrow? These practices of contemporary U.S. culture are taken for granted by many, just as was Chinese footbinding. Until these cultural processes are debunked, seen as if for the first time, they might seem normal.

### debunking **SOCIETY’S MYTHS**

**MYTH:** Email scams promising to deliver a large sum of cash from some African bank if you contact the email deliverer prey on people who are just stupid or old.

**Sociological research:** Studies of such email scams indicate that Americans and Brits are especially susceptible to such scams because they play on widely held cultural stereotypes about Africa (that these are economically unsophisticated nations in which people are unable to

manage money). These scams also exploit the American cultural belief that it is possible to “get rich quick”—reflecting a belief in individualism and the belief that anyone who tries hard enough can get ahead (Smith 2009). ●

## Establishing Critical Distance

Debunking requires critical distance—that is, being able to detach from the situation at hand and view things with a critical mind. The role of critical distance in developing a sociological imagination is well explained by the early sociologist **Georg Simmel** (1858–1918). Simmel was especially interested in the role of *strangers* in social groups.

Strangers have a position both inside and outside social groups; they are part of a group without necessarily sharing the group’s assumptions and points of view. Because of this, the stranger can sometimes see the social structure of a group more readily than can people who are thoroughly imbued with the group’s worldview. Simmel suggests that the sociological perspective requires a combination of nearness and distance. One must have enough critical distance to avoid being taken in by the group’s definition of the situation, but be near enough to understand the group’s experience.

Sociologists are not typically strangers to the society they study. You can acquire critical distance through a willingness to question the forces that shape social behavior. Often, sociologists become interested in things because of their own experiences. The biographies of sociologists are rich with examples of how their personal lives informed the questions they asked. Among sociologists are former ministers and nuns now studying the sociology of religion, women who have encountered sexism who now study the significance of gender in society, rock-and-roll fans studying music in popular culture, and sons and daughters of immigrants now analyzing race and ethnic relations (see the box “Understanding Diversity: Becoming a Sociologist”).

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIVERSITY

The analysis of diversity is one central theme of sociology. Differences among groups, especially differences in the treatment of groups, are significant in any society, but they are particularly compelling in a society as diverse as that in the United States.

### Defining Diversity

Today, the United States includes people from all nations and races. In 1900, one in eight Americans was not

**table 1.1** Minorities in the U.S. Population Projections

	2010	2020	2030	2040	2050
White	79.5%	78.0%	76.6%	75.3%	74.0%
Black	12.9%	13.0%	13.1%	13.0%	13.0%
American Indian and Alaskan Native	1.0%	1.1%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%
Asian	4.7%	5.5%	6.3%	7.1%	7.8%
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%
Two or more races	1.8%	2.2%	2.7%	3.2%	3.7%

Note: The U.S. census counts race and Hispanic ethnicity separately. Thus Hispanics may fall into any of the race categories. Those who identified themselves as Hispanic were 16% of the total U.S. population in the 2010 census.

White; today, racial and ethnic minority groups, including African Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, Native Hawaiians, Asian Americans, and people of more than one race represent 35 percent of Americans, and that proportion is growing (U.S. Census Bureau 2010; also Table 1.1 and Map 1.1, p. 11). These broad categories themselves are internally diverse, including, for example, those with long-term roots in the United States, as well as Cuban Americans, Salvadorans, Cape Verdeans, Filipinos, and many others.

Perhaps the most basic lesson of sociology is that people are shaped by the social context around them. In the United States, with so much cultural diversity, people will share some experiences, but not all. Experiences not held in common can include some of the most important influences on social development, such as language, religion, and the traditions of family and community. Understanding diversity means recognizing this diversity and making it central to sociological analyses.

In this book, we use the term *diversity* to refer to the variety of group experiences that result from the social structure of society. **Diversity** is a broad concept that includes studying group differences in society’s opportunities, the shaping of social institutions by different social factors, the formation of group and individual identity, and the process of social change. Diversity includes the study of different cultural orientations, although diversity is not exclusively about culture.

Understanding diversity is crucial to understanding society because fundamental patterns of social change and social structure are increasingly patterned by diverse group experiences. There are numerous sources of diversity, including race, class, gender, and others as well. Age, nationality, sexual orientation, and region of residence, among other factors, also differentiate the experience of diverse groups in the United States. And as the world is increasingly interconnected through global communication and a global economy, the study



# UNDERSTANDING diversity

## Become a Sociologist

Individual biographies often have a great influence on the subjects sociologists choose to study. The authors of this book are no exception. Margaret Andersen, a White woman, now studies the sociology of race and women's studies. Howard Taylor, an African American man, studies race, social psychology, and especially race and intelligence testing. Here, each of them writes about the influence of their early experiences on becoming a sociologist.

**Margaret Andersen** As I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, my family moved from California to Georgia, then to Massachusetts, and then back to Georgia. Moving as we did from urban to small-town environments and in and out of regions of the country that were very different in their racial character, I probably could not help becoming fascinated by the sociology of race. Oakland, California, where I was born, was highly diverse; my neighborhood was mostly White and Asian American. When I moved to a small town in Georgia in the 1950s, I was ten years old, but I was shocked by the racial norms I encountered. I had always loved riding in the back of the bus—our major mode of transportation in Oakland—and could not understand why this was no longer allowed. Labeled by my peers as an outsider because I was not southern, I painfully learned what it meant to feel excluded just because of “where you are from.”

When I moved again to suburban Boston in the 1960s, I was defined by Bostonians as a southerner and ridiculed. Nicknamed “Dixie,” I was teased for

how I talked. Unlike in the South, where despite strict racial segregation Black people were part of White people's daily lives, Black people in Boston were even less visible. In my high school of 2500 or so students, Black students were rare. To me, the school seemed not much different from the strictly segregated schools I had attended in Georgia. My family soon returned to Georgia, where I was an outsider again; when I later returned to Massachusetts for graduate school in the 1970s, I worried about how a southerner would be accepted in this “Yankee” environment. Because I had acquired a southern accent, I think many of my teachers stereotyped me and thought I was not as smart as the students from other places.

These early lessons, which I may have been unaware of at the time, must have kindled my interest in the sociology of race relations. As I explored sociology, I wondered how the concepts and theories of race relations applied to women's lives. So much of what I had experienced growing up as a woman in this society was completely unexamined in what I studied in school. As the women's movement developed in the 1970s, I found sociology to be the framework that helped me understand the significance of gender and race in people's lives. To this day, I write and teach about race and gender, using sociology to help students understand their significance in society.

**Howard Taylor** I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, the son of African American professional parents. My mother, Murtis Taylor, was a social worker and the founder and then president of a social work agency called the Murtis H. Taylor Multi-Service Center in Cleveland, Ohio. She is well known for her contributions to the city of Cleveland and was an early “superwoman,” working days and nights, cooking, caring for her two sons, and being active in many professional and civic activities. I think this gave me an early appreciation for the roles of women and the place of gender in society, although I surely would not have articulated it as such at the time.



Courtesy of Howard Taylor

My father was a businessman in a then all-Black life insurance company. He was also a “closet scientist,” always doing experiments and talking about scientific studies. He encouraged my brother and me to engage in science, so we were always experimenting with scientific studies in the basement of our house. In the summers, I worked for my mother in the social service agency where she worked, as a camp counselor, and in other jobs. Early on, I contemplated becoming a social worker, but I was also excited by science. As a young child, I acquired my father's love of science and my mother's interest in society. In college, the one field that would gratify both sides of me, science and social work, was sociology. I wanted to study human interaction, but I also wanted to be a scientist, so the appeal of sociology was clear.

At the same time, growing up African American meant that I faced the consequences of race every day. It was always there, and like other young African American children, I spent much of my childhood confronting racism and prejudice. When I discovered sociology, in addition to bridging the scientific and humanistic parts of my interests, I found a field that provided a framework for studying race and ethnic relations. The merging of two ways of thinking, coupled with the analysis of race that sociology has long provided, made sociology fascinating to me.

Today, my research on race, class, gender, and intelligence testing seems rooted in these early experiences. I do quantitative research in sociology and see sociology as a science that reveals the workings of race, class, and gender in society.



Amber Alexander, University of Delaware

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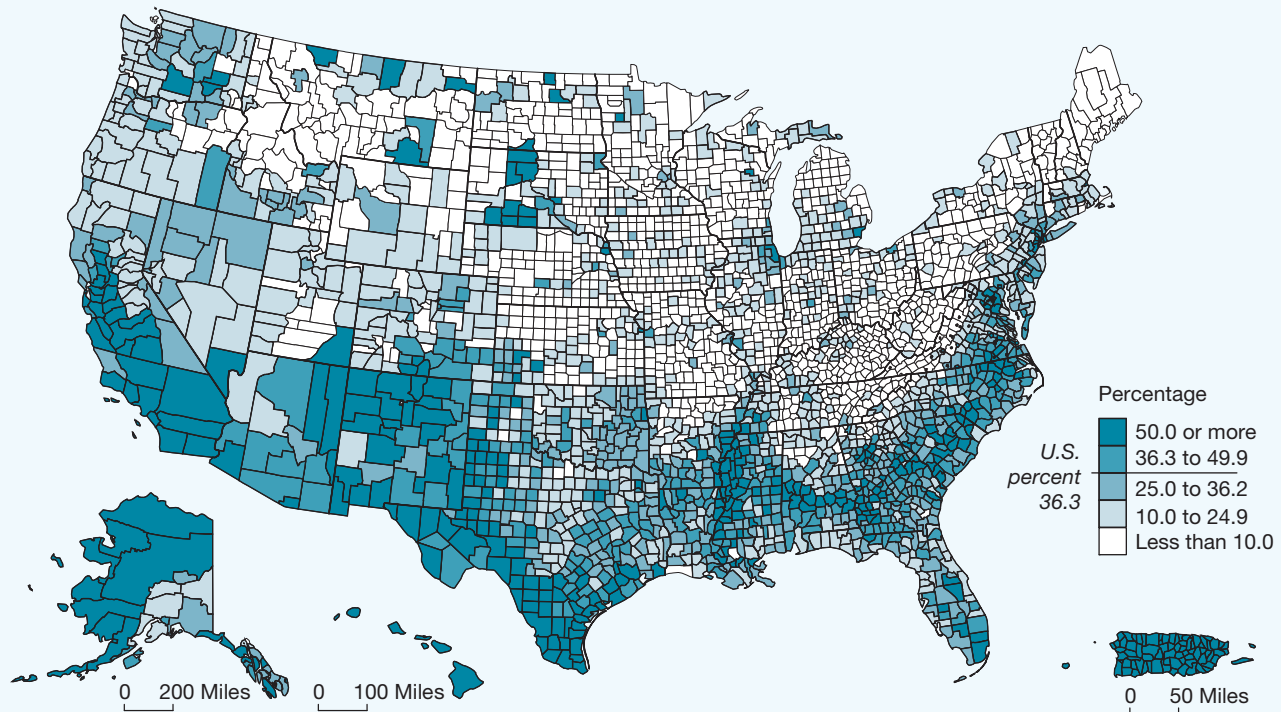
## Mapping America's Diversity: A Changing Population

The 2010 census of the United States shows that the nation is becoming

increasingly diverse. Looking at this map, what factors do you think are

influencing this change? Data: U.S. Census Bureau. 2010. [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

Minority Population as a Percentage of County Population



of diversity also encompasses a global perspective—that is, an understanding of the international connections existing across national borders and the impact of such connections on life throughout the world.

### thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

What are some of the sources of *diversity* on your campus? How does this diversity affect social relations on campus? ●

### Society in Global Perspective

No society can be understood apart from the global context that now influences the development of all societies. The social and economic system of any one society is increasingly intertwined with those of other nations. Coupled with the increasing ease of travel and telecommunication, this means that a global perspective is necessary to understand change both in the United States and in other parts of the world.

To understand globalization, you must look beyond the boundaries of your own society to see how patterns in any given society are increasingly being shaped by the connections between societies. Comparing and contrasting societies across different cultures is valuable. It helps you see patterns in your own

society that you might otherwise take for granted, and it enriches your appreciation of the diverse patterns of culture that mark human society and human history. A global perspective, however, goes beyond just comparing different cultures; it also helps you see how events in one society or community may be linked to events occurring on the other side of the globe.

For instance, return to the example of unemployment that C. Wright Mills used to distinguish between troubles and issues. One man may lose his job in Peoria, Illinois, and a woman in Los Angeles may employ a Latina domestic worker to take care of her child while she pursues a career. On the one hand, these are individual experiences for all three people, but they are linked in a pattern of globalization that shapes the lives of all three. The Latina domestic may have a family whom she has left in a different nation so that she can afford to support them. The corporation for which the Los Angeles woman works may have invested in a new plant overseas that employs cheap labor, resulting in the unemployment of the man in Peoria. The man in Peoria may have seen immigrant workers moving into his community, and one of his children may have made a friend at school who speaks a language other than English.





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Understanding diversity is important in a society comprising so many different groups, each with unique, but interconnected, experiences.



Warren Miller/The New Yorker Collection/cartoonbank.com

*"Actually, Lou, I think it was more than just my being in the right place at the right time. I think it was my being the right race, the right religion, the right sex, the right socioeconomic group, having the right accent, the right clothes, going to the right schools..."*

Such processes are increasingly shaping many of the subjects examined in this book—work, family, education, politics, just to name a few. Without a global perspective, you would not be able to fully understand the experience of any one of the people just mentioned much less how society is being shaped by these processes of change and global context. Throughout this book, we will use a global



AP Images/Eugene Hoshiko, File

Globalization brings diverse cultures together, but it is also a process by which Western markets have penetrated much of the world.

perspective to understand some of the developments shaping contemporary life in the United States.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Like the subjects it studies, sociology is itself a social product. Sociology first emerged in western Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this period, the political and economic systems of Europe were rapidly changing. Monarchy, the rule of society by kings and queens, was disappearing, and new ways of thinking were emerging. Religion as the system of authority and law was giving way to scientific authority. At the same time, capitalism grew. Contact between different societies increased, and worldwide economic markets developed. The traditional ways of the past were giving way to a new social order. The time was ripe for a new understanding.

## The Influence of the Enlightenment

The **Enlightenment** in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe had an enormous influence on the development of modern sociology. Also known as the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment was characterized by faith in the ability of human reason to solve society's problems. Intellectuals believed that there were natural laws and processes in society to be discovered and used for the general good. Modern science was gradually supplanting traditional and religious explanations for natural phenomena with theories confirmed by experiments.

The earliest sociologists promoted a vision of sociology grounded in careful observation. **Auguste Comte** (1798–1857), a French philosopher who coined the term *sociology*, believed that just as science had discovered the laws of nature, sociology could discover the laws of human social behavior and thus help solve society's problems. This approach is called **positivism**, a system of thought, still prominent today, in which scientific observation and description is considered the highest form of knowledge, as opposed to, say, religious dogma or poetic inspiration. The modern scientific method, which guides sociological research, grew out of positivism.

**Alexis de Tocqueville** (1805–1859), a French citizen, traveled to the United States as an observer beginning in 1831. Tocqueville thought that democratic values and the belief in human equality positively influenced American social institutions and transformed personal relationships. Less admiringly, he felt that in the United States the tyranny of kings had been replaced by the “tyranny of the majority.” He was referring to the ability of a majority to impose its will on everyone else in a democracy. Tocqueville also felt that despite the emphasis on individualism in American culture, Americans had little independence of mind, making them self-centered and anxious about their social class position (Collins and Makowsky 1972).

Another early sociologist is **Harriet Martineau** (1802–1876). Like Tocqueville, Martineau, a British citizen, embarked on a long tour of the United States in 1834. She was fascinated by the newly emerging culture in America. Her book *Society in America* (1837) is an analysis of the social customs that she observed. This



Spencer Arnold/Getty Images

As one of the earliest observers of American culture, Harriet Martineau used the powers of social observation to record and analyze the social structure of American society. Long ignored for her contributions to sociology, she is now seen as one of the founders of early sociological thought.

important work was overlooked for many years, probably because the author was a woman. It is now recognized as a classic. Martineau also wrote the first sociological methods book, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838), in which she discussed how to observe behavior when one is a participant in the situation being studied.

## Classical Sociological Theory

Of all the contributors to the development of sociology, the giants of the European tradition were Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. They are classical thinkers because the ideas they offered more than 150 years ago continue to influence our understanding of society, not just in sociology but in other fields as well (such as political science and history).

**Emile Durkheim.** During the early academic career of the Frenchman **Emile Durkheim** (1858–1917), France was in the throes of great political and religious upheaval. Anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews) was being expressed, along with ill feeling among other religions, as well. Durkheim, himself Jewish, was fascinated by how the public degradation of Jews by non-Jews seemed to calm and unify a large segment of the divided French public. Durkheim later wrote that public rituals have a special purpose in society, creating social solidarity, referring to the bonds that link the members of a group. Some of Durkheim's most significant works explore the question of what forces hold society together and make it stable.

According to Durkheim, people in society are glued together by belief systems (Durkheim 1947/1912). The rituals of religion and other institutions symbolize and reinforce the sense of belonging. Public ceremonies create a bond between people in a social unit. Durkheim thought that by publicly punishing people, such rituals sustain moral cohesion in society. Durkheim's views on this are further examined in Chapter 7, which discusses deviant behavior.

Durkheim also viewed society as an entity larger than the sum of its parts. He described this as society *sui generis* (which translates as “thing in itself”), meaning that society is a subject to be studied separately from the sum of the individuals who compose it. Society is external to individuals, yet its existence is internalized

in people's minds—that is, people come to believe what society expects them to believe. Durkheim conceived of society as an



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Emile Durkheim established the significance of society as something larger than the sum of its parts. Social facts stem from society and have profound influence on the lives of people within society.



integrated whole—each part contributing to the overall stability of the system. His work is the basis for *functionalism*, an important theoretical perspective that we will return to later in this chapter.

One contribution from Durkheim was his conceptualization of the *social*. Durkheim created the term **social facts** to indicate those social patterns that are *external* to individuals. Things such as customs and social values exist outside individuals, whereas psychological drives and motivation exist inside people. Social facts, therefore, are not to be explained by biology or psychology but are the proper subject of sociology; they are its reason for being.

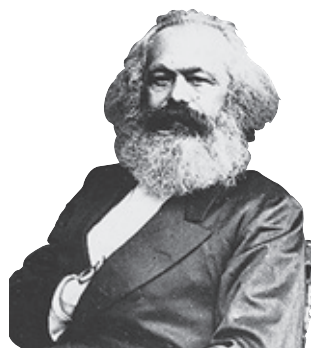
A striking illustration of this principle was Durkheim's study of suicide (Durkheim 1951/1897). He analyzed rates of suicide in a society, as opposed to looking at individual (psychological) causes of suicide. He showed that suicide rates varied according to how clear the norms and customs of the society were, whether the norms and customs were consistent with each other and noncontradictory. Anomie (the breakdown of social norms) exists where norms were either grossly unclear or contradictory; the suicide rates were higher in such societies or such parts of a society. It is important to note that this condition is in society—external to individuals, but felt by them (Puffer 2009). In this sense such a condition is truly societal.

Durkheim held that social facts, though they exist outside individuals, nonetheless pose constraints on individual behavior. Durkheim's major contribution was the discovery of the social basis of human behavior. He proposed that society could be known through the discovery and analysis of social facts. This is the central task of sociology (Bellah 1973; Coser 1977; Durkheim 1950/1938).

**Karl Marx.** It is hard to imagine another scholar who has had as much influence on intellectual history as has **Karl Marx** (1818–1883). Along with his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, Marx not only changed intellectual history but world history too.

Marx's work was devoted to explaining how capitalism shaped society. He argued that capitalism is an economic system based on the pursuit of profit and the sanctity of private property. Marx used a class analysis to explain capitalism, describing capitalism as a system of relationships among different classes, including

capitalists (also known as the bourgeois class), the proletariat (or working



Karl Marx analyzed capitalism as an economic system with enormous implications for how society is organized, in particular how inequality between groups stems from the economic organization of society.

class), the petty bourgeoisie (small business owners and managers), and the *lumpenproletariat* (those “discarded” by the capitalist system, such as the homeless). In Marx's view, profit, the goal of capitalist endeavors, is produced through the exploitation of the working class. Workers sell their labor in exchange for wages, and capitalists make certain that wages are worth less than the goods the workers produce. The difference in value is the profit of the capitalist. In the Marxist view, the capitalist class system is inherently unfair because the entire system rests on workers getting less than they give.

Marx thought that the economic organization of society was the most important influence on what humans think and how they behave. He found that the beliefs of the common people tended to support the interests of the capitalist system, not the interests of the workers themselves. Why? Because the capitalist class controls the production of goods and the production of ideas. It owns the publishing companies, endows the universities where knowledge is produced, and controls information industries—thus shaping what people think.

Marx considered all of society to be shaped by economic forces. Laws, family structures, schools, and other institutions all develop, according to Marx, to suit economic needs under capitalism. Like other early sociologists, Marx took social structure as his subject rather than the actions of individuals. It was the *system* of capitalism that dictated people's behavior. Marx saw social change as arising from tensions inherent in a capitalist system—the conflict between the capitalist and working classes. Marx's ideas are often misperceived by U.S. students because communist revolutionaries throughout the world have claimed Marx as their guiding spirit. It would be naive to reject his ideas solely on political grounds. Much that Marx predicted has not occurred—for instance, he claimed that the “laws” of history made a worldwide revolution of workers inevitable, and this has not happened. Still, he left us an important body of sociological thought springing from his insight that society is systematic and structural and that class is a fundamental dimension of society that shapes social behavior.

**Max Weber.** Max Weber (1864–1920; pronounced “Vay-ber”) was greatly influenced by Marx's work and built upon it. But, whereas Marx saw economics as the basic organizing element of society, Weber theorized that society had three basic dimensions: political, economic, and cultural.



Max Weber used a multidimensional approach to analyzing society, interpreting the economic, cultural, and political organization of society as together shaping social institutions and social change.

According to Weber, a complete sociological analysis must recognize the interplay between economic, political, and cultural institutions (Parsons 1947). Weber is credited with developing a *multidimensional* analysis of society that goes beyond Marx's more one-dimensional focus on economics.

Weber also theorized extensively about the relationship of sociology to social and political values. He did not believe there could be a value-free sociology because values would always influence what sociologists considered worthy of study. Weber thought sociologists should acknowledge the influence of values so that ingrained beliefs would not interfere with objectivity. Weber professed that the task of sociologists is to teach students the uncomfortable truth about the world. Faculty should not use their positions to promote their political opinions, he felt; rather, they have a responsibility to examine all opinions, including unpopular ones, and use the tools of rigorous sociological inquiry to understand why people believe and behave as they do.

An important concept in Weber's sociology is *verstehen* (meaning "understanding" and pronounced "ver-shtay-en"). **Verstehen**, a German word, refers to understanding social behavior from the point of view of those engaged in it. Weber believed that to understand social behavior, one had to understand the meaning that a behavior had for people. He did not believe sociologists had to be born into a group to understand it (in other words, he didn't believe "it takes one to know one"), but he did think sociologists had to develop some subjective understanding of how other people experience their world. One major contribution from Weber was the definition of *social action* as a behavior to which people give meaning (Gerth and Mills 1946; Parsons 1951b; Weber 1962/1913), such as placing a bumper sticker on your car that states pride in U.S. military troops.

## Sociology in America

American sociology was built on the earlier work of Europeans, but unique features of U.S. culture contribute to its distinctive flavor. Less theoretical and more practical than their European counterparts, early American sociologists believed that if they exposed the causes of social problems, they could alleviate some of the consequences, which are measured in human suffering.

Early sociologists in both Europe and the United States conceived of society as an organism, a system of interrelated functions and parts that work together to create the whole. This perspective is called the **organic metaphor**. Sociologists saw society as constantly evolving, like an organism. The question many early sociologists asked was to what extent humans could shape the evolution of society.

Many were influenced in this question by the work of British scholar **Charles Darwin** (1809–1882), who revolutionized biology when he identified the process termed *evolution*, a process by which new species

are created through the survival of the fittest. **Social Darwinism** was the application of Darwinian thought to society. According to the social Darwinists, the "survival of the fittest" is the driving force of social evolution as well. They conceived of society as an organism that evolved from simple to complex in a process of adaptation to the environment. They theorized that society was best left alone to follow its natural evolutionary course. Because social Darwinists believed that evolution always took a course toward perfection, they advocated a *laissez-faire* (that is, "hands-off") approach to social change. Social Darwinism was thus a conservative mode of thought; it assumed that the current arrangements in society were natural and inevitable (Hofstadter 1944).

Most other early sociologists in the United States took a more reform-based approach. Nowhere was the emphasis on application more evident than at the University of Chicago, where a style of sociological thinking known as the Chicago School developed. The Chicago School is characterized by thinkers who were interested in how society shaped the mind and identity of people. We study some of these thinkers, such as George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, in Chapter 4. They thought of society as a human laboratory where they could observe and understand human behavior in order to be better able to address human needs, and they used the city in which they lived as a living laboratory.

**Robert Park** (1864–1944), from the University of Chicago, was a key founder of sociology. Originally a journalist who worked in several midwestern cities, Park was interested in urban problems and how different racial groups interacted with each other. He was also fascinated by the sociological design of cities, noting that cities were typically sets of concentric circles. At the time, the very rich and the very poor lived in the middle, ringed by slums and low-income neighborhoods (Collins and Makowsky 1972; Coser 1977; Park and Burgess 1921). Park would still be intrigued by how boundaries are defined and maintained in urban neighborhoods. You might notice this yourself. A single street crossing might delineate a Vietnamese neighborhood from an Italian one, an affluent White neighborhood from a barrio. The social structure of cities continues to be a subject of sociological research.

Many early sociologists of the Chicago School were women whose work is only now being rediscovered. **Jane Addams** (1860–1935) was one of the most renowned sociologists of her day. But, because she was a woman, she was never given the jobs or prestige that men in her time received. She was the only practicing sociologist ever to win a Nobel Peace Prize (in 1931), never had a regular teaching job. Instead, she used her skills as a research sociologist to develop community projects that assisted people in need (Deegan 1988). She was a leader in the settlement house movement providing services and doing research to improve the lives of slum dwellers, immigrants, and other poor people.





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Jane Addams, the only sociologist to win the Nobel Peace Prize, used her sociological skills to try to improve people's lives. The settlement house movement provided social services to groups in need, while also providing a social laboratory in which to observe the sociological dimensions of problems such as poverty.

Another early sociologist, widely noted for her work in the anti-lynching movement, was **Ida B. Wells-Barnett** (1862–1931). Born a slave, Ida B. Wells-Barnett learned to read and write at Rust College, a school established for freed slaves, later receiving her teaching credentials at Fisk University. She wrote numerous essays on the status of African Americans in the United States and was an active crusader against lynching and for women's rights, including the right to vote. Because she was so violently attacked—in writing and in actual threats—because of her passionate work, she often had to write under an assumed name. Until recently, her contributions to the field of sociology have been largely unexamined. Interestingly, her grandson, Troy Duster (b. 1936), now a faculty member at New York University and the University of California, Berkeley, became the president of the American Sociological Association in 2004 (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998; Henry 2008; Giddings 2008).

**W.E.B. Du Bois** (1868–1963; pronounced “due boys”) was one of the most important early sociological thinkers in America. Du Bois was a prominent Black scholar, a cofounder in 1909 of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), a prolific writer, and one of America's best minds. He received the first Ph.D. ever awarded to a Black person in any field (from Harvard University), and he studied for a time in Germany, hearing several lectures by Max Weber. Du Bois was deeply troubled by the racial divisiveness in society, writing in a classic essay published in 1901 that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (Du Bois 1901: 354). Like many of his women



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Ida B. Wells-Barnett is now well-known for her brave campaign against the lynching of African American people. Less known are her early contributions to sociological thought.



An insightful observer of race and culture, W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the first sociologists to use community studies as the basis for sociological work. His work, long excluded from the “great works” of sociological theory, is now seen as a brilliant and lasting analysis of the significance of race in the United States. Courtesy of University of Massachusetts at Amherst, W. E. B. Du Bois Library

colleagues, he envisioned a community-based, activist profession committed to social justice (Deegan 1988); he was a friend and collaborator with Jane Addams. He believed in the importance of a scientific approach to sociological questions, but he also thought that convictions always directed one's studies.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN SOCIOLOGY

The founders of sociology have established theoretical traditions that ask basic questions about society and inform sociological research. The idea of theory may seem dry to you because it connotes something that is only hypothetical and divorced from “real life”; however, sociological theory is one of the tools that sociologists use to interpret real life. Sociologists use theory to organize their observations and apply them to the broad questions sociologists ask, such as: How are individuals related to society? How is social order maintained? Why is there inequality in society? How does social change occur?

Different theoretical frameworks within sociology make different assumptions and provide different insights about the nature of society. In the realm of *macrosociology* are theories that strive to understand society as a whole. Durkheim, Marx, and Weber were macrosociological theorists. Theoretical frameworks that center on face-to-face social interaction are known as *microsociology*. Some of the work derived from the Chicago School—research that studies individuals and group processes in society—is microsociological. Although sociologists draw from diverse theoretical perspectives to understand society, three broad traditions form the major theoretical perspectives that they use: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction.

### Functionalism

Functionalism has its origins in the work of Durkheim, who you will recall was especially interested in how social order is possible and how society remains relatively stable. **Functionalism** interprets each part of society in terms of how it contributes to the stability of the whole. As Durkheim suggested, functionalism conceptualizes society as more than the sum of its component parts.

# what would they say now?

## Classical Theorists Reflect on the War in Afghanistan

Suppose some of the classical theorists of sociology were suddenly brought back to life. What might they say about the contemporary war in Afghanistan?

**Emile Durkheim:** War, although involving human tragedy, also promotes a sense of group and national identity. Patriotic symbols, such as bumper stickers saying Support Our Troops, promote a collective sense of national identity.



Sebastian Artz/Getty Images

**Max Weber:** War involves multiple dimensions of society. Wars are often fought for political reasons, but also involve economic forces (such as the need for oil in Western societies).



P-59 Photos/Alamy

Cultural forces, such as the conflict between western values and Islamic value systems, are also a major social force.

**Karl Marx:** Wars must be understood as the result of the dynamics of capitalism. Not only do they involve economic greed (such as the profits garnered from the pursuit of oil), but private, economic interests are paramount in understanding war, such as the businesses that profit from them.



Alexis C. Glenn/UP/Landov

**Jane Addams:** As a sociologist who won the Nobel Peace Prize, I must advocate for peaceful resolutions to world conflicts. Were the more pacifist values of women to guide international affairs, we would not experience as many conflicts as we do in a more masculine-based political culture.



David Grossman/Alamy

**W.E.B. Du Bois:** War has a disproportionate impact on people of color. AfricansAmericans (and, he would now note, Latinos) are most likely to be recruited to fight wars, and thus there is a disproportionate impact of tragedy on these as well as low-income, working-class families.



Owen Franken/Corbis

**Ida B. Wells-Barnett:** War has a profound influence on the lives of women and people of color, often resulting in rape and other atrocious human rights violations by occupying armies.



AP Photo/Karel Prinsloo

Each part is “functional” for society—that is, contributes to the stability of the whole. The different parts are primarily the institutions of society, each of which is organized to fill different needs and each of which has particular consequences for the form and shape of society. The parts each then depend on one another.

The family as an institution, for example, serves multiple functions. At its most basic level, the family has a reproductive role. Within the family, infants receive protection and sustenance. As they grow older, they are exposed to the patterns and expectations of their culture. Across generations, the family supplies a



## key sociological concepts

As you build your sociological perspective, you must learn certain key concepts in order to begin understanding how sociologists view human behavior. *Social structure*, *social institutions*, *social change*, and *social interaction* are not the only sociological concepts, but they are fundamental to grasping the sociological perspective.

**Social Structure.** Earlier, we defined social structure as the organized pattern of social relationships and social institutions that together constitute society. Social structure is not a “thing,” but refers to the fact that social forces not always visible to the human eye guide and shape human behavior. Acknowledging that social structure exists does not mean that humans have no choice in how they behave, only that those choices are largely conditioned by one’s location in society.

**Social Institutions.** In this book, you will also learn about the significance of **social institutions**, defined as established and organized systems of social behavior with a particular and recognized purpose. The family, religion, marriage, government, and the economy are examples of major social institutions. Social institutions confront individuals at birth and transcend individual experience, but they still influence individual behavior.

**Social Change.** As you can tell, sociologists are also interested in the process of **social change**, the alteration of society over time. As much as sociologists see society as producing certain outcomes, they do not see society as fixed, nor do they see humans as passive recipients of social expectations. Sociologists view society as stable but constantly changing.

**Social Interaction.** Sociologists see **social interaction** as behavior between two or more people that is given meaning. Through social interaction, people react and change, depending on the actions and reactions of others. Since society changes as new forms of human behavior emerge, change is always in the works.

As you read this book, you will see that these key concepts—social structure, social institutions, social change, and social interaction—are central to the sociological imagination.

broad unit of support and enriches individual experience with a sense of continuity with the past and future. All these aspects of family can be assessed by how they contribute to the stability and prosperity of society. The same is true for other institutions.

The functionalist framework emphasizes the consensus and order that exist in society, focusing on social stability and shared public values. From a functionalist perspective, disorganization in the system, such as deviant behavior and so forth, leads to change because societal components must adjust to achieve stability. This is a key part of functionalist theory—that when one part of society is not working (or is *dysfunctional*, as they would say), it affects all the other parts and creates social problems. Change may be for better or worse; changes for the worse stem from instability in the social system, such as a breakdown in shared values or a social institution no longer meeting people’s needs (Collins 1994; Eitzen and Baca Zinn 2006; Turner 1974).

## thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

What are the *manifest functions* of grades in college?

What are the *latent functions*? •

Functionalism was a dominant theoretical perspective in sociology for many years, and one of its major theorists was **Talcott Parsons** (1902–1979). In Parsons’s view, all parts of a social system are interrelated, with different parts of society having different basic functions. Functionalism was further developed by **Robert Merton** (1910–2003). Merton saw that social practices often have consequences for society that are not immediately apparent, not necessarily the same as the stated purpose. He suggested that human behavior has both manifest and latent functions. *Manifest functions* are the stated and intended goals of social behavior. *Latent functions* are neither stated nor intended.

Critics of functionalism argue that its emphasis on social stability is inherently conservative and that it understates the roles of power and conflict in society. Critics also disagree with the explanation of inequality offered by functionalism—that it persists because social inequality creates a system for the fair and equitable distribution of societal resources. Functionalists would argue that it is fair and equitable that the higher social classes earn more money since they are more important (functional) to society. Critics of functionalism argue that functionalism is too accepting of the status quo. Functionalists would counter this argument by saying that, regardless of the injustices that inequality produces, inequality serves a purpose in society: It provides an incentive system for people to work and promotes solidarity among groups linked by common social standing.

## Conflict Theory

**Conflict theory** emphasizes the role of coercion and power, a person’s or group’s ability to exercise influence and control over others, in producing social order. Whereas functionalism emphasizes cohesion within society, conflict theory emphasizes strife and friction. Derived from the work of Karl Marx, conflict theory pictures society as fragmented into groups that compete for social and economic resources. Social order is maintained not by consensus but by domination, with power in the hands of those with the greatest political, economic, and social resources. When consensus exists, according to conflict theorists, it is attributable to people being united around common interests, often in opposition to other groups (Dahrendorf 1959; Mills 1956).

According to conflict theory, inequality exists because those in control of a disproportionate share of society’s resources actively defend their advantages. The masses are not bound to society by their shared values but by coercion at the hands of the powerful. In conflict theory, the emphasis is on social control, not consensus and conformity. Groups and individuals advance

their own interests, struggling over control of societal resources. Those with the most resources exercise power over others; inequality and power struggles are the result. Conflict theory gives great attention to class, race, and gender in society because these are seen as the grounds of the most pertinent and enduring struggles in society.

Whereas functionalists find some benefit to society in the unequal distribution of resources, conflict theorists see inequality as inherently unfair, persisting only because groups who are economically advantaged use their social position to their own betterment. Their dominance even extends to the point of shaping the beliefs of other members of the society by controlling public information and having major influence over institutions such as education and religion. From the conflict perspective, power struggles between conflicting groups are the source of social change. Typically, those with the greatest power are able to maintain their advantage at the expense of other groups.

Conflict theory has been criticized for neglecting the importance of shared values and public consensus in society while overemphasizing inequality. Like functionalist theory, conflict theory finds the origins of social behavior in the structure of society, but it differs from functionalism in emphasizing the importance of power.

## Symbolic Interaction

The third major framework of sociological theory is **symbolic interaction theory**. Instead of thinking of society in terms of abstract institutions, symbolic interactionists consider immediate social interaction to be the place where “society” exists. Because of the human capacity for reflection, people give meaning to their behavior, and this is how they interpret the different behaviors, events, or things that are significant for sociological study.

Because of this, symbolic interaction, as its name implies, relies extensively on the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely on in the process of social interaction. Symbolic interaction theory emphasizes face-to-face interaction and thus is a form of microsociology, whereas functionalism and conflict theory are more macrosociological.

Derived from the work of the Chicago School, symbolic interaction theory analyzes society by addressing the subjective meanings that people impose on objects, events, and behaviors. Subjective meanings are given primacy because, according to symbolic interactionists and according to Thomas’s dictum mentioned earlier, people behave based on what they *believe*, not just on what is objectively true. Thus, society is considered to be socially constructed through human interpretation (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Blumer 1969; Shibutani 1961). Symbolic interactionists see meaning as constantly modified through social interaction. People interpret one another’s behavior, and it is these interpretations that form the social bond. These interpretations



Symbolic interaction theory can help explain why people might do things that otherwise seem contrary to what one might expect.

are called the “definition of the situation.” For example, why would young people smoke cigarettes even though all objective medical evidence points to the danger of doing so? The answer is in the definition of the situation that people create. Studies find that teenagers are well informed about the risks of tobacco, but they also think that “smoking is cool,” that they themselves will be safe from harm, and that smoking projects an image—a positive identity for boys as a “tough guy” and for girls as fun-loving, mature, and glamorous. Smoking is also defined by young women as keeping you thin—an ideal constructed through dominant images of beauty. In other words, the symbolic meaning of smoking overrides the actual facts regarding smoking and risk (Stjerna et al. 2004).

## thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

Think about the example given about smoking, and using a *symbolic interaction* framework, how would you explain other risky behaviors, such as steroid use among athletes or eating disorders among young women? ●

Symbolic interaction interprets social order as constantly negotiated and created through the interpretations people give to their behavior. In observing society, symbolic interactionists see not simply facts but “social constructions,” the meanings attached to things, whether those are concrete symbols (like a certain way of dress or a tattoo) or nonverbal behaviors. To a symbolic interactionist, society is highly subjective—existing in the minds of people, even though its effects are very real.

Functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction theory are by no means the only theoretical



## careers in sociology

**Now that you understand a bit more what sociology is about, you may ask, What can I do with a degree in sociology?** This is a question we often hear from students. There is no single job called “sociologist” like there is “engineer” or “nurse” or “teacher,” but sociology prepares you well for many different kinds of jobs, whether with a bachelor’s degree or a postgraduate education. The skills you acquire from your sociological education are useful for jobs in business, health care, criminal justice, government agencies, various nonprofit organizations, and other job venues.

For example, the research skills one gains through sociology can be important in analyzing business data or organizing information for a food bank or homeless shelter. Students in sociology also gain experience working with and understanding those with different cultural and social backgrounds; this is an important and valued skill that employers seek. Also, the ability to dissect the different causes of a social problem can be an asset for jobs in various social service organizations.

Some sociologists have worked in their communities to deliver more effective social services. Some are employed in business organizations and social services where they use their sociological training to address issues such as poverty, crime

and delinquency, population studies, substance abuse, violence against women, family social services, immigration policy, and any number of other important issues. Sociologists also work in the offices of U.S. representatives and senators, doing background research on the various issues addressed in the political process.

These are just a few examples of how sociology can prepare you for various careers. A good way to learn more about how sociology prepares you for work is to consider doing an internship while you are still in college.

For more information about careers in sociology, see the booklet, *Careers in Sociology*, available through the American Sociological Association ([www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org)).

### Critical Thinking Exercise

1. Read a national newspaper over a period of one week and identify any experts who use a sociological perspective in their commentary. What does this suggest to you as a possible career in sociology? What are some of the different subjects about which sociologists provide expert information?
2. Identify some of the students from your college who have finished degrees in sociology. What different ways have they used their sociological knowledge?

frameworks in sociology. For some time, however, they have provided the most prominent general explanations of society. Each has a unique view of the social realm. None is a perfect explanation of society, yet each has something to contribute. Functionalism gives special weight to the order and cohesion that usually characterizes society. Conflict theory emphasizes the inequalities and power imbalances in society. Symbolic interaction emphasizes the meanings that humans give

to their behavior. Together, these frameworks provide a rich, comprehensive perspective on society, individuals within society, and social change (see Table 1.2).

### Feminist Theory

Contemporary sociological theory has been greatly influenced by the development of **feminist theory**. Prior to the emergence of second-wave feminism (the feminist movement emerging in the 1960s and 1970s), women

**table 1.2** Three Classical Sociological Frameworks

Basic Questions	Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Symbolic Interaction
<i>What is the relationship of individuals to society?</i>	Individuals occupy fixed social roles.	Individuals are subordinated to society.	Individuals and society are interdependent.
<i>Why is there inequality?</i>	Inequality is inevitable and functional for society.	Inequality results from a struggle over scarce resources.	Inequality is demonstrated through the importance of symbols.
<i>How is social order possible?</i>	Social order stems from consensus on public values.	Social order is maintained through power and coercion.	Social order is sustained through social interaction and adherence to social norms.
<i>What is the source of social change?</i>	Society seeks equilibrium when there is social disorganization.	Change comes through the mobilization of people struggling for resources.	Change evolves from an ever-evolving set of social relationships and the creation of new meaning systems.
<b>Major Criticisms</b>			
	This is a conservative view of society that underplays power differences among and between groups.	The theory understates the degree of cohesion and stability in society.	There is little analysis of inequality, and it overstates the subjective basis of society.

were largely absent and invisible within most sociological work—indeed, within most academic work. When seen, they were strongly stereotyped in traditional roles as wives and mothers. Feminist theory developed to understand the status of women in society and with the purpose of using that knowledge to better women's lives.

Feminist theory has created vital new knowledge about women and has also transformed what is understood about men. Feminist scholarship in sociology, by focusing on the experiences of women, provides new ways of seeing the world and contributes to a more complete view of society. Feminist theory is a now

vibrant and rich perspective in sociology, and it has added much to how people understand the sociology of gender—and its connection to other social factors, such as race and class. Along with the classical traditions of sociology, feminist theory is included throughout this book in the context of particular topics.

Whatever the theoretical framework used, theory is evaluated in terms of its ability to explain observed social facts. The sociological imagination is not a single-minded way of looking at the world. It is the ability to observe social behavior and interpret that behavior in light of societal influences.

## chapter summary

### What is sociology?

Sociology is the study of human behavior in society. The *sociological imagination* is the ability to see societal patterns that influence individuals. Sociology is an *empirical* discipline, relying on careful observations as the basis for its knowledge.

### What is debunking?

*Debunking* in sociology refers to the ability to look behind things taken for granted, looking instead to the origins of social behavior.

### Why is diversity central to the study of sociology?

One of the central insights of sociology is its analysis of social diversity and inequality. Understanding *diversity* is critical to sociology because it is necessary to analyze *social institutions* and because diversity shapes most of our social and cultural institutions.

### When and how did sociology emerge as a field of study?

Sociology emerged in western Europe during the *Enlightenment* and was influenced by the values of critical reason, humanitarianism, and positivism. *Auguste*

*Comte*, one of the earliest sociologists, emphasized sociology as a positivist discipline. *Alexis de Tocqueville* and *Harriet Martineau* developed early and insightful analyses of American culture.

### What are some of the basic insights of classical sociological theory?

*Emile Durkheim* is credited with conceptualizing society as a social system and with identifying *social facts* as patterns of behavior that are external to the individual. *Karl Marx* showed how capitalism shaped the development of society. *Max Weber* sought to explain society through cultural, political, and economic factors.

### What are the major theoretical frameworks in sociology?

*Functionalism* emphasizes the stability and integration in society. *Conflict theory* sees society as organized around the unequal distribution of resources and held together through power and coercion. *Symbolic interaction* theory emphasizes the role of individuals in giving meaning to social behavior, thereby creating society. *Feminist theory* is the analysis of women and men in society and is intended to improve women's lives.

## Key Terms

conflict theory 18  
debunking 7  
diversity 9  
empirical 6  
Enlightenment 13  
feminist theory 20

functionalism 16  
issues 5  
organic metaphor 15  
positivism 13  
social change 18  
social Darwinism 15

social facts 14  
social institution 18  
social interaction 18  
social structure 5  
sociological imagination 5

sociology 4  
symbolic interaction theory 19  
troubles 5  
verstehen 15

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