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Each of us is a social being. We are born into a social environment; we fully develop into human beings in a social environment; and we typically live out our lives in a social environment. What we think, how we feel, and what we say and do all are shaped by our interactions with other people. The scientific study of these social interactions and of social organization is called **sociology**.

Human beings have long had an interest in understanding themselves and their social arrangements. We know from ancient folklore, myths, and archeological remains that humans have long pondered why people of other societies order their lives in ways that differ from theirs. They have reflected on the reasons that members of their society violate social rules. They have wondered why some people become wealthy while others experience abject poverty. They have been bewildered by episodes of mass hysteria, revolution, and war. Yet it has been only in the past 175 years or so that human beings have sought answers to these and related questions through science. This science—sociology—pursues the study of social interaction and group behavior through research governed by the rigorous and disciplined collection of data and analysis of facts.

Many of us are not only interested in understanding society and human behavior. We also would like to improve the human condition so that we might lead fuller, richer, and more fruitful lives. To do this we need knowledge about the basic structures and processes underlying our social lives. Sociology, through its emphasis on observation and measurement, allows us to bring rigorous and systematic scientific thinking and information to bear on difficult questions associated with social policies and choices, including those related to poverty, health, immigration, crime, and education. Many people interested in these issues do not realize that more than concern is needed to solve problems. Action must be informed by knowledge.

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Sociological research often is applied to practical matters. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court relied heavily upon social science findings regarding the effects of segregation on children in reaching its historic 1954 decision declaring mandatory school segregation unconstitutional (Klineberg, 1986; Jackson, 1990). Similarly, research on the nursery school experiences of children was influential in leading government officials to establish the Head Start preschool educational program for young children in 1965 and later to provide rigorous follow-up programs (Zigler and Styfco, 1993).

Increasingly, Americans are coming to recognize the centrality of the social and behavioral sciences to the nation's health and science agenda. A 1999 study released by the American Cancer Society showed that two-thirds of all cancer deaths could be prevented if we changed our behavior in areas such as smoking and diet (American Cancer Society, 1999). Likewise, human behavior and society are responsible for our environmental problems, and sociological insight is required to solve them (Foster, 1999). Sociologists may design studies deliberately to evaluate public policies or to inform us about social conditions, such as those that assess the effects of various criminal justice programs (Sampson and Laub, 1990; Langan, 1991), the social consequences of unemployment (Wilson, 1996), and the effects of family structure on children and their futures (Waite, 2000; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Acock and Demo, 1994). The collection of census and other national statistical data, which is the foundation of many federal and state policies on health, education, housing, and welfare, is based on sample survey and statistical techniques developed by sociologists and other social scientists. Sociology, then, is a powerful scientific tool both for acquiring knowledge about ourselves and for intervening in social affairs to realize various goals.

## The Sociological Perspective

The sociological perspective invites us to look beyond what we take for granted about our social lives and examine them in fresh and creative ways (Berger, 1963). There are many layers of meaning in the human experience. Networks of invisible rules and institutional arrangements guide our behavior. We continually evolve, negotiate, and rework tacit bargains with family members, friends, lovers, and work associates. As we look beyond outer appearances at what lies beneath, we encounter new levels of social reality. This approach to reality is the core of the sociological perspective.

In this section we will see how sociology uncovers new levels of reality, discuss the sociological imagination, and define microsociology and macrosociology.

## New Levels of Reality

A classic study by social scientist Elliot Liebow (1967) in a downtown Washington, D.C., African-American neighborhood shows us how sociology can reveal new levels of social reality. In the early 1960s, our nation's concern about poverty led Liebow to involve himself in a unique study of low-income urban black men. Of course, most African Americans are not poor; today, for example, nearly 80 percent live above the poverty line (Dalaker and Proctor, 2000), and African-American men are typically employed and live respectable, conventional lives (Duneier, 1992). Nonetheless, most of the problems of poverty that Liebow observed 30 years ago are still with us today, and his findings continue to provide insight into this major U.S. social problem. Perhaps more importantly for us, his study provides an excellent example of how sociological research allows us to go beyond outward appearances and simplistic explanations.

Liebow conducted his study by hanging out on a corner in front of the New Deal Carry-out Shop, where he won the trust of 20 or so African-American men. The men Liebow got to know came to the corner shop, not far from the White House in a blighted section of the city, to eat, to enjoy easy talk, and in general to pass the time. The following excerpt relates what Liebow observed one weekday morning (Liebow, 1967:29):

*A pickup truck drives slowly down the street. The truck stops as it comes abreast of a man sitting on a cast-iron porch and the white driver calls out, asking if the man wants a day's work. The man shakes his head and the truck moves on up the block, stopping again whenever idling men come within calling distance of the driver. At the Carry-out corner, five men debate the question briefly and shake their heads no to the truck. The truck turns the corner and repeats the same performance up the next street.*

The white truck driver viewed the African-American streetcorner men as lazy and irresponsible, unwilling “to take a job even if it were handed to them on a platter.” Like many middle-class Americans then and today, he believed that inner-city African-American men live only for the moment with little thought for long-term consequences. The truck driver assumed that all the streetcorner men were able-bodied men with no means of support—and no desire to take the work he offered them. Like many Americans, he assumed that the job problems of inner-city men resulted from the men themselves—from their lack of willingness to work.

Because of his relationship with the men at the New Deal, Liebow was able to look beyond the stereotyped images of African-American men to find another level of reality. Liebow found that most of the men who turned down the truck driver’s offer had jobs but, for various

reasons, were not at work that particular morning. A few did not have jobs, but with reason; the man on the porch had severe arthritis. Liebow discovered that streetcorner men and middle-class men differed not so much in their values and their attitudes toward the future as in the different futures they saw ahead of them. Middle-class men have incomes high enough to justify long-term investments, and they hold jobs that offer the promise of career advancement. Like middle-class men, the men on the corner wanted stable jobs and marriages. However, in their world, jobs were only intermittently available, almost always menial, often hard, and invariably low paying. The streetcorner men were obliged to expend all their resources maintaining themselves in the present and were fully aware of the hopelessness of their prospects.

Social policy based on the truck driver’s interpretations would be directed toward changing the motivations of streetcorner men and encouraging them to develop those values and goals that lead to occupational achievement. But such social programs would have no chance of succeeding; the men were already willing to work and did not need to have their values and goals redirected.

In seeking an explanation for their behavior, Liebow looked beyond the individual men and the outward appearances of streetcorner life. He turned his investigative eye upon the social arrangements that are external to individuals but that nonetheless structure their experiences and place constraints on their behavior.

## The Sociological Imagination

A basic premise underlying sociology is the notion that only by understanding the society in which we live can we gain a fuller insight into our lives. C. Wright Mills (1959) termed this quality of the discipline the **sociological imagination**: the ability to see our private experiences

## 1.1 ISSUES IN FOCUS



## The Reality in the Lives of Inner-City Men

Are Elliot Liebow's conclusions still valid? Sociologist Stephen M. Petterson (1997) studied this issue in today's society. He wanted to investigate the validity of the argument that young African-American males are without jobs because they

refuse to accept low-paying jobs. But Petterson found "no race differences in the wages sought by young jobless men" (1997:605). Indeed, black men's reports of the lowest wage they would accept and wages at last employment

were *lower* than those of white men. Further, he found that both black and white men often will accept work at lower wages than they have stated. His findings support the idea that young black and white men share the same

and personal difficulties as, in part, a reflection of the structural arrangements of society and the times in which we live. We tend to go about our daily activities thinking only about school, job, family, and neighborhood. The sociological imagination allows us to see the relationship between our personal experiences and broader social and historical events.

Mills, an influential but controversial sociologist, pointed out that our personal troubles and public issues "overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life." The job difficulties experienced by many Americans in the early 1990s provide an example. The restructuring and downsizing of corporate America compounded the effects of economic recession. This economic malaise had a devastating effect on the employment ranks of the nation's youth: Nearly 2 million fewer young people were employed in 1993 than in 1989 (Bernstein, 1993). Clearly, the work values and attitudes of 2 million young Americans did not change so drastically that by 1993 they were unwilling to work. Mills's (1959) point is that in situations of this kind we cannot simply look to the personal character of individuals to explain changes in their employment circum-

stances. Rather, we need to focus on our economic and political institutions for a definition of the problem, for an understanding of its causes, and for a range of possible solutions. The sociological imagination allows us to place the private job frustrations of many Americans into the context of the structural factors operating in the larger society and the workplace.

We see the usefulness of the sociological imagination in other spheres of life as well. Mills (1959:9) was especially concerned with issues of war and peace:

*The personal problems of war, when it occurs, may be how to survive it or how to die in it with honor; how to make money out of it; how to climb into the higher safety of the military apparatus; or how to contribute to the war's termination. . . . But the structural issues of war have to do with its causes; with what types of men it throws up into command; with its effects upon economic and political, family and religious institutions, with the unorganized irresponsibility of a world of nation-states.*

In sum, the sociological imagination allows us to identify the links between our personal

standards for judging the acceptability of wages. As Liebow found in the 1960s, joblessness is not necessarily related to a lack of willingness to work for low wages, and social programs designed in ignorance of that fact are doomed to failure.

How then do we account for the problems of inner-city men? Sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987, 1991, 1995) has shown that African-American poverty and

disadvantage persist in our nation's central cities because many low-skill jobs have disappeared over the last three decades. Many blue-collar jobs in manufacturing that had provided job security and mobility for the disadvantaged are gone. This fundamental problem of male joblessness contributes to many problems of the inner city—high rates of welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and

crime (Anderson, 1990; Huff-Corzine, Corzine, and Moore, 1991; Wilkie, 1991). Wilson contends that the primary causes of the plight of inner-city African Americans are not discrimination, pathological values, or welfare dependency, as a simplistic look at outward appearances might suggest, but the changing structure of the nation's economy and the widening class division among African Americans.

lives and the larger social forces of life—to see that what is happening to us immediately is a minute point at which our personal lives and society intersect.

## Microsociology and Macrosociology

Sociologists seek to extend Mills's insight by distinguishing between the micro, or small-scale, aspects of the social enterprise and the macro, or large-scale, structural components. When we focus on the micro elements, we examine behavior close-up and observe what happens as people interact on a face-to-face basis. Sociologists term this level microsociology—micro meaning “small” as in the word “microscope.” **Microsociology** entails the detailed study of what people say, do, and think moment by moment as they go about their daily lives. Liebow's study of the African-American men on the Washington streetcorner provides an illustration of microsociology. Liebow wanted to find out how the men saw themselves, how they dealt with one another in face-to-face encounters, and how they balanced their hopes and aspirations with their real-world ex-

periences. Microsociology, then, deals with everyday life: a woman and a man initiating a conversation on a bus, several youngsters playing basketball on an inner-city playground, guests at a baby shower, a police officer directing traffic at a busy intersection, or students and their teacher interacting in a classroom.

Sociologists also turn an investigative eye upon “the big picture” and study social groups and societies. This approach is termed macrosociology—macro meaning “large.” **Macrosociology** focuses upon large-scale and long-term social processes of organizations, institutions, and broad social patterns, including the state, social class, the family, the economy, culture, and society. At this level sociologists may direct their attention to the changes in the structure of a religious sect, the impact of population dynamics and computer technologies on the work force, shifts in the racial and ethnic composition of a city, or the dynamics of intergroup competition and conflict. When we examine the lives of Liebow's streetcorner men from a macrosociological perspective, we gain a picture of the institutional constraints that minority and economically disadvantaged men face and that limit their job opportunities.

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The microsociological and macrosociological levels are not independent of one another (Ritzer, 2000; House, 1995). The circumstances of the streetcorner men Liebow studied and the underclass Wilson described testify to this fact. We can most appropriately think of the distinction between “micro” and “macro” as one of degree (Lawler, Ridgeway, and Markovsky, 1993). Macro structures, such as organizations or the hierarchy of social classes, are composed of routine patterns of interaction on the micro level. Macro structures provide the social contexts in which people encounter one another at the micro level. Micro structures, such as friendship relations and work groups, form out of these encounters and provide a link from individuals to macro structures. Micro structures also may cause change and evolution in macro structures. For example, the macro structure of education and an organization embedded in it, your high school, may have provided the social context from which your group of best friends—a micro structure—emerged. Such a group of students, through letter-writing campaigns, sit-ins, formation of clubs, and other means, can cause a high school and education in general—macro structures—to adapt and change. In sum, complex webs of relationship between the micro and macro levels contribute to an ever-changing and diverse social order (Mouzelis, 1992).

### The Development of Sociology

Sociology, too, is a product of micro and macro forces. The political revolutions ushered in by the French Revolution in Europe in 1789 and continuing through the 19th century provided a major impetus to sociological work (Ritzer, 2000; Lepenies, 1988). At the same time, the Industrial Revolution that swept

many Western nations resulted in large numbers of people leaving a predominantly agricultural setting for work in factories. New social and economic arrangements arose to provide the many demands of emergent capitalism. These major changes in the way society was organized led some of the thinkers of the day to turn their attention to the study of social organization and social interactions, resulting in the founding of the science we now call sociology (Ritzer, 2000).

In this section we will consider the contributions of six particularly influential sociologists, the emergence of sociology in the United States, and contemporary sociology.

### Auguste Comte: The Founder of Sociology

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is commonly credited with being the founder of sociology and as having coined the name “sociology” for the new science. He emphasized that the study of society must be scientific, and he urged sociologists to use systematic observation, experimentation, and comparative historical analysis as their methods.

Comte divided the study of society into social statics and social dynamics, a conceptual distinction that is still with us. **Social statics** involves those aspects of social life that have to do with order, stability, and social organization that allow societies and groups to hold together and endure. **Social dynamics** refers to those processes of social life that pattern institutional development and have to do with social change. Although his specific ideas no longer direct contemporary sociology, Comte created the intellectual foundation for a science of social life and exerted enormous influence on the thinking of other sociologists, particularly Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau, and Émile Durkheim.

## Harriet Martineau: Feminist and Methodologist

While Comte was laying the theoretical foundations for sociology, the English sociologist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) was paving the way for the new discipline through her observations of social behavior in the United States and England. Like Comte, she insisted that the study of society represents a separate scientific field. Among her contributions was the first book on the methodology of social research, *How to Observe Manners and Morals*, published in 1838. She also undertook the comparative study of the stratification systems of Europe and the United States. Martineau showed how the basic moral values of the young American nation shaped its key institutional arrangements. Throughout her career Martineau was an ardent defender of women's rights. She showed the similarities between the position of women in Western societies and that of American slaves, and called for freedom and justice for all in an age in which they were granted only to white males (Rossi, 1973; Deegan, 1991).

Though Harriet Martineau was a popular and influential intellectual and author during her lifetime, her contributions to sociology were marginalized by the men who dominated the discipline during its early years and kept women like Martineau out of powerful academic positions (Ritzer, 2000). Consequently, Martineau's significance in the early development of sociology has only recently been fully recognized (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1996a; Hoecker-Drysdale, 1994).

## Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), an English sociologist, shared Comte's concern with social statics and social dynamics. He compared soci-

ety to a biological organism and depicted it as a system, a whole made up of interrelated parts. Just as the human body is made up of organs, so society is made up of institutions (e.g., the family, religion, education, the state, and the economy). In his description of society as an organism, Spencer focused on its structures and the functional contributions these structures make to its survival. This image of society is in line with what sociologists now call structural-functional theory.

Spencer viewed static social institutions as the organs of society, but he had an even greater interest in social dynamics. He proposed an evolutionary theory of historical development, one that depicted the world as growing progressively better. Intrigued by the Darwinian view of natural selection, Spencer applied the concept of survival of the fittest to the social world, an approach termed **Social Darwinism**. He sought to demonstrate that government should not interfere with the natural processes going on in a society. In this manner, he argued, people and social patterns that were "fit" would survive and those that were "unfit" would die out. If this principle were allowed to operate freely, human beings and their institutions would progressively adapt themselves to their environment and reach higher and higher levels of historical development (Ritzer, 2000).

Spencer's Social Darwinist outlook shows that the ideas we hold about ourselves and the universe are shaped by the social age in which we live. Spencer did much of his serious writing at the height of laissez-faire capitalism, so it is hardly surprising that he embraced the doctrine that rugged individualism, unbridled competition, and noninterference by government would achieve the greatest positive good. Spencer's Social Darwinist ideas were used extensively within England and the United States to justify unrestrained capitalism. John D. Rockefeller, the American oil tycoon, would echo Spencer and observe: "The growth of a large business is

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merely a survival of the fittest. . . . This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of a law of nature” (quoted by Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin, 1984:26).

### Karl Marx: The Role of Class Conflict

Although Karl Marx (1818–1883) considered himself a political activist and not a sociologist, in truth he was both—and a philosopher, historian, economist, and political scientist as well. He viewed science not only as a vehicle for understanding society but also as a tool for transforming it. Marx was especially eager to change the structure of capitalist institutions and to establish new institutions in the service of humanity. Although born in Germany, authorities there viewed Marx as politically dangerous, and he was compelled to spend much of his adult life as a political exile in London.

Marx tried to discover the basic principles of history. He focused his search on the economic environments in which societies develop, particularly the current state of their technology and their method of organizing production, such as hunting and gathering, agriculture, or industry. At each stage of history these factors dictate the group that will dominate society and the groups that will be subjugated. He believed that society is divided into those who own the means of producing wealth and those who do not, which gives rise to **class conflict**. All history, he said, is composed of struggles between classes. In ancient Rome the conflict was between patricians and plebeians and between masters and slaves. In the Middle Ages it was a struggle between guildmasters and journeymen and between lords and serfs. In contemporary Western societies, class antagonisms revolve about the struggle between the oppressing capitalist class or bourgeoisie and the oppressed working class or proletariat. The former derive their income through their ownership of the means of pro-



*The conflict perspective argues that the structure of our society is powerfully affected by conflicts such as that between the United Parcel Service and its workers in 1997.*

duction, primarily factories, which allows them to exploit the labor of workers. The latter own nothing except their labor power and, because they are dependent for a living on the jobs provided by capitalists, must sell their labor power in order to exist.

Marx’s perspective is called **dialectical materialism**, the notion that development depends on the clash of contradictions and the subsequent creation of new, more advanced structures. The approach depicts the world as made up not of static structures but of dynamic processes, a world of becoming rather than of being. In the Marxian view of history, every economic order

grows to a state of maximum efficiency; at the same time, it develops internal contradictions or weaknesses that contribute to its decay. The roots of a new order begin to take hold in the old order. In time the new order displaces the old order while absorbing its most useful features. Marx depicted slavery as being displaced by feudalism, feudalism by capitalism, capitalism by socialism, and ultimately socialism by communism, the highest stage of society.

In Marx's theory, political ideologies, religion, family organization, education, and government make up what he called the *superstructure* of society. This superstructure is strongly influenced by the economic base of society—its mode of producing goods and its class structure. When one class controls the critical means whereby people derive their livelihood, its members gain the leverage necessary to fashion other aspects of institutional life—the superstructure—in ways that favor their class interests. However, the economic structure does not only shape the superstructure; aspects of the superstructure act upon the economic base and modify it in a reciprocal relationship. Marx thought that if a revolutionary ideology emerged to mobilize the working class in pursuit of its class interest, the existing social order would be overturned and replaced by one that would pursue more humane goals (Boswell and Dixon, 1993). In Marx's view, economic factors—whether one owns and controls the means of production—are primary. For this reason, he is viewed by many as an **economic determinist**.

Though Marx is often identified with the communist revolutions and socialist governments that appeared in many nations in the 20th century, Marx actually had little to say about communism or socialism. Marx was a utopian who centered his attention on capitalism and its internal dynamics, assuming that when socialism replaced capitalism many of the world's problems would disappear.

Marx is now recognized by most sociologists as a major figure in sociological theory (Ritzer, 2000; Pampel, 2000). Today he is better known and understood, and more widely studied, than at any time since he began his career in the 1840s. Much of what is valuable in his work has now been incorporated into mainstream sociology, particularly as it finds expression in the conflict perspective. In sum, for most sociologists as for most historians and economists, Marx's work is too outdated to follow in its particulars, but it remains theoretically important and animates much contemporary research and theory (e.g., Kelley and Evans, 1995; Wright, 2000).

## Émile Durkheim: Social Integration and Social Facts

While Marx saw society as a stage upon which classes with conflicting interests contested with one another, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1916) focused his sociological eye on the question of how societies hold together and endure. The principal objection Durkheim had to Marx's work was that Marx attributed too much importance to economic factors and class struggle and not enough to social solidarity (Bottomore, 1981; Turner, 1990).

Central to Durkheim's (1897/1951) sociology is the concept of *social integration*. Social integration refers to the density of social relationships, literally the number of relationships that exist among a collection of people. The more people are connected to one another, the stronger and more meaningful are the sentiments that emerge out of these relationships (Pope, 1976). Durkheim argued that social integration is necessary for the maintenance of the social order and for the happiness of individuals. In particular, he suggested that happiness depends on individuals finding a sense of meaning outside themselves that occurs within the context of group involvement. Durkheim

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sought to demonstrate that the destruction of social bonds (e.g., divorce) has negative consequences and under some circumstances can increase the chance that people will commit suicide. Other sociologists picked up on this central idea and showed how the breakdown of group bonds can contribute to deviant behavior (Merton, 1968) and participation in social movements (Kornhauser, 1959). Like Marx, Durkheim continues to influence modern sociology, stimulating research and theoretical change (Brint, 2001; von Poppel and Day, 1996; Lehman, 1994, 1995; Meštrović, 1992).

In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893/1964), Durkheim examined social solidarity, the tendency of people to maintain social relationships. He distinguished between the types of solidarity found in early and modern societies. In early societies such as hunting and gathering or agrarian societies, the social structure was relatively simple, with little division of labor. People were knit together by their engagement in similar tasks. They derived a sense of oneness from being so much alike, what Durkheim termed *mechanical solidarity*. Modern societies, in contrast, are characterized by complex social structures and a sophisticated division of labor. People perform specialized tasks in factories, offices, and schools. No one person is self-sufficient, and all must depend upon others to survive. Under these circumstances, society is held together by the interdependence fostered by the differences among people, what Durkheim labeled *organic solidarity*.

In examining social solidarity and other sociological questions, Durkheim believed that we should focus on the group, not the individual. He contended that the distinctive subject matter of sociology should be the study of social facts. **Social facts** are aspects of social life that cannot be explained in terms of the biological or mental characteristics of the individual. People experience social facts as external to

themselves in the sense that facts have an independent reality and form a part of people's objective environment. As such, social facts serve to constrain their behavior, and include not only legal and moral rules in society, but also relationships and behavior patterns of others that affect our day-to-day lives.

*Material social facts* include society itself, its major institutions (the state, religion, family, education, etc.) and the various forms that underlie society (housing patterns, the crime rate, population distributions, etc.). *Nonmaterial social facts* are the social rules, principles of morality, meanings of symbols, and the shared consciousness that results from these.

Durkheim insisted that the explanation of social life must be sought in society itself. Society, he said, is more than the sum of its parts; it is a system formed by the association of individuals that comes to constitute a reality with its own distinctive characteristics.

Durkheim convincingly demonstrated the critical part social facts play in human behavior in his book *Suicide* (1897/1951), a landmark study in the history of sociology. Whereas earlier sociologists were given to armchair speculation, Durkheim undertook the painstaking collection and analysis of data on suicide. He found that suicide rates were higher among Protestants than Catholics, higher among the unmarried than the married, and higher among soldiers than civilians. Moreover, suicide rates were higher in times of peace than in times of war and revolution, and higher in times of economic prosperity and recession than in times of economic stability. He concluded that different suicide *rates* are the consequence of variations in social solidarity. Individuals enmeshed in a web of social bonds are less inclined to suicide than individuals who are weakly integrated into group life.

Durkheim was the first major sociologist to face up to the complex problems associated with the disciplined and rigorous empirical

study of social life. He challenged the idea that suicide was the result of purely individual factors. As an alternative, he proposed that suicide is a social fact: a product of the meanings, expectations, and structural arrangements that evolve as people interact with one another. As such, suicide is explainable by social factors.

## Max Weber: Subjectivity and Social Organization

No sociologist other than Marx has had a greater impact on sociology than the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920). Over the course of his career, Weber left a legacy of rich insights for a variety of disciplines, including economics, political science, and history. Among sociologists, he is known not only for his theoretical contributions but also for a number of specific ideas that have generated considerable interest and research in their own right. Many common but important ideas that we use to understand social life have their origin in the work of Weber, including *bureaucracy*, *lifestyle*, the *Protestant ethic*, and *charisma*. His sociological work covered a wide range of topics, including politics, organizations, social stratification, law, religion, capitalism, music, the city, and cross-cultural comparison.

Weber contended that a critical focus for sociology is the study of human subjectivity: the intentions, values, beliefs, and attitudes that underlie people's behavior. Weber employed the German word *Verstehen*—meaning “understanding” or “insight”—in describing this approach for learning about the subjective meanings people attach to their actions. In using this method, sociologists mentally attempt to place themselves in the shoes of other people and identify what they think and how they feel.

Another notable sociological contribution Weber made is the concept of the ideal type. An *ideal type* is a concept constructed by sociologists to portray the principal characteristics

of something they want to study. It is a tool that allows sociologists to generalize and simplify data by ignoring minor differences in order to accentuate major similarities. For example, a police department and a hospital differ in many obvious respects, but they share many attributes under the heading “bureaucracy.” In Chapter 4 we will see pp. 115–16 how Weber employed the notion of the ideal type to devise his model of bureaucracy. The ideal type serves as a measuring rod against which sociologists can evaluate actual cases. For example, if sociologists determine, on the basis of historical and contemporary evidence, that the ideal type of bureaucracy has a specific set of characteristics, they can compare this ideal type with actual bureaucracies and then develop explanations for why some of the characteristics of actual bureaucracies deviate from the ideal type. In this way we can learn much about causes of variation in how organizations function.

In his writings Weber stressed the importance of a **value-free sociology**. He emphasized that sociologists must not allow their personal biases to affect the conduct of their scientific research. Weber recognized that sociologists, like everyone else, have individual biases and moral convictions regarding behavior. But he insisted that sociologists must cultivate a disciplined approach to the phenomena they study so that they may see facts as they are, not as they might wish them to be. By the same token, Weber recognized that objectivity is not neutrality or moral indifference. *Neutrality* implies that a person does not take sides on an issue and *moral indifference* that one does not care; *objectivity* has to do with the pursuit of scientifically verifiable knowledge. Though he promoted objectivity as an important goal in social science, he did not take a neutral stance as an intellectual or as a citizen. He was not afraid to express a value judgment or to tackle important issues of the day (Ritzer, 2000).

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### American Sociology

The sociologists we have considered thus far have been of European origin. Were sociologists to establish a sociological Hall of Fame, Comte, Martineau, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber would unquestionably be among its first inductees. Yet, as sociology entered the 20th century, Americans assumed a critical role in its development. In the period preceding World War I, an array of factors provided a favorable climate for sociology in the United States (Fuhrman, 1980; Hinkle, 1980). As in Europe, the Industrial Revolution and urbanization gave a major impetus to sociological study. An added factor was the massive immigration of foreigners to the United States and the problems their absorption and assimilation posed for American life. Further, both sociology and the modern university system arose together. In Europe, by contrast, sociology had a more difficult time becoming established because it had to break into an established system of academic disciplines.

Early American sociology was optimistic, forward-looking, and rooted in a belief in progress, the value of individual freedom and welfare, and a confidence that, though there might be some flaws, American society was basically sound. Some early American sociologists, like Lester Ward (1841–1918), believed that sociologists should identify the basic laws that underlie social life and use this knowledge to reform society. Others, like William Graham Sumner (1840–1910), adapted a survival-of-the-fittest approach derived from Spencer, believing that society's problems would work themselves out if left alone.

An exception to such optimism is the work of W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963), a leading African-American intellectual and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who advocated radical changes to eliminate racial inequality. DuBois also took sociology out of the ivory tower and did investigative fieldwork, gathering material on the African-American community of



*W.E.B. DuBois conducted path-breaking research on African-American life, developed a theoretical understanding of racial inequality, and advocated radical social change to eliminate racism.*

Philadelphia, which appeared as *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1900. Between 1896 and 1914, DuBois led the annual Atlanta University Conferences on Negro Problems that produced the first reliable sociological research on the South.

Contributions of considerable significance to sociology were also made by sociologists at the University of Chicago, where the first department of sociology in the United States was established in 1893. Here, in the first 30 years of the 20th century, a number of sociologists carried out work that remains influential in sociology today. The city of Chicago was viewed as a “social laboratory,” and it was subjected to intense and systematic study. Included in this research were investigations of juvenile gangs, immigrant ghettos, wealthy Gold Coast and

slum life, taxi-dance halls, prostitution, and mental disorders.

During this period, Chicago sociologists trained an estimated half of the sociologists in the world. Significantly, a number of the world's most capable female social scientists were among the university's graduates. But its department of sociology was largely a male world, one that afforded a hostile environment to the political activism espoused by many of the women. The women's world of sociology was centered at Hull House, a Chicago settlement house cofounded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Settlement houses were charitable establishments set up in poor neighborhoods to provide services to the urban poor, particularly immigrants. Hull House served as a model for the social reform activities and the civic, recreational, and educational programs that came to be identified with the settlement houses that were established throughout the nation. The juvenile court system and workers' compensation were products of the two women's efforts. Addams and Starr also pioneered campaigns for woman suffrage, better housing, improvements in public welfare, stricter child-labor laws, and the protection of working women. The women of Hull House are credited with inventing the research procedures of community case studies and of demographic mapping—showing on city maps the distributions of people with respect to income, age, ethnicity, language, levels of education, and other characteristics—that would later become hallmarks of Chicago sociology (Deegan, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 1990; Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1996a).

During the 1940s and until the mid-1960s, sociologists at Columbia, Harvard, and the University of California at Berkeley took the lead and established the major directions for sociological research and theory, crafting techniques for surveying public attitudes and refining models that portrayed society as a system made up of parts with interrelated functions. At this time the leaders of American sociology be-

lieved sociology should be a science concerned with pursuing knowledge for its own sake, so they insisted that the discipline not be focused directly on solving social problems.

However, the social turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s brought to sociology many students who were activists for civil rights, student power, and peace. These young “new breed” sociologists contended that the doctrine of sociological neutrality was a cloak concealing moral insensitivity. In their reaction against the neutrality of previous decades, they also broke with established sociological theory and sought new directions in theory and research grounded in the work of Karl Marx and C. Wright Mills (see Agger, 1991, and Maynard and Clayman, 1991).

## Contemporary Sociology

The evolution of sociology continues. Among the many theoretical developments that have occurred, three influential and related frameworks stand out: critical theory, feminism, and postmodernism.

### ▲ Critical Theory

Critical theory grew out of a dissatisfaction with 20th-century sociology in general and Marxism in particular (Ritzer, 2000). Early critical theorists were German sociologists who fled the Nazi regime in the 1930s and came to the United States, where some remained. These critical theorists and their followers criticized sociology for having a scientific approach that viewed individuals as passive and helpless entities locked in social structures, and for analyzing societies without detecting social problems or envisioning what societies should be. They criticized Marxism because they believed it denied the importance of culture by viewing it as part of the “superstructure,” largely determined by economic forces. Critical theorists argue that mass culture (e.g., television, film, popular music), a product of a capitalist media industry, cannot be a true reflection of people's beliefs, tastes, values, ideas, and lifestyles. Instead,

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mass culture pacifies, represses, and controls people who might otherwise recognize important contradictions and inequalities in their social lives. Critical theorists claim that mass culture makes the political system seem to be a benign entity, supporting the status quo, that benefits all.

Critical theory is both an outgrowth of and a contributor to conflict theory, which we will discuss in the next section. It has also had a major influence on two other contemporary movements in sociology: feminism and post-modern social theory.

### ▲ Feminism

Feminism is an intellectual movement in the humanities and social sciences that is currently having a profound impact on the nature and direction of sociology (e.g., Thistle, 2000). Sociological feminism begins with the observation that for most of the history of sociology, women hardly appear in social theory and research. Men's experiences have been viewed as universal and women's activities and experiences have been hidden. When women have been studied and theorized about, it is in marginal and secondary roles such as housewife or workers in other low-status occupations. Feminism explicitly examines women's roles and experiences in society, working to fully uncover women's contributions to social life and the nature of the structures and processes that maintain gender inequality. At the same time, sociological feminism has worked to develop theories grounded in the experiences and situations of women that can be used to criticize oppressive social relations and produce social transformation for the betterment of all humankind (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1996b).

Feminism is not a single theory but an evolving set of theoretical perspectives, including liberal feminism, Marxian feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism, all of which focus on women's experiences and on gender inequality

(Tong, 1989; England, 1993) and which have recently begun to significantly impact mainstream sociological theory (Chafetz, 1997). The latest major developments in feminist theory and research grow out of the realization that the social experience of gender is not universal. Women's and men's experiences are strongly influenced by social class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, and sexual preference and by their social positions in the family, the labor force, and the world economic system. For example, the experience of being a young white middle-class male Episcopalian is fundamentally different from that of an elderly female Cuban immigrant living in poverty. Sociological feminism places much emphasis on different forms of oppression, on how these forms intersect with gender and with each other, on the resulting diversity of experience, and on the implications such an orientation has for the elimination of all forms of exploitation and oppression (Richardson, Taylor, and Whittier, 1997; Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1996b).

### ▲ Postmodernism

Like feminism, postmodernism (Ritzer, 1997; Best and Kellner, 1991; Rosenau, 1992) is an intellectual movement that has influenced scholarship in literature, art, politics, communications, and other disciplines, as well as sociology. Postmodernists are deeply distrustful of science and the principle of objectivity, arguing that scientific knowledge is as much a product of the socially determined interests and biases of investigators as it is of facts, which themselves are products of social processes. In addition, postmodernists point out that scientific knowledge has failed to solve social problems or to prevent war and genocide.

At the core of postmodern social theory is the assumption that the modern period of history is coming to an end. That period, which began with the Enlightenment and the end of the medieval period, included industrialization, urbanization, colonialism, and the ideologies of



*According to postmodernism, we have entered an age in which human society is dominated by images and information disseminated through mass media.*

democracy, individualism, and secularism. According to postmodernists, we are now entering an age dominated not by the goods-producing economy of modernity but by the production and dissemination of images and information through mass media and advanced computer technology. If societies are based on ever-changing signs, codes, and models presented in the media, they have no basic structure, and the grand abstract social theories of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and others discussed above can be of little use in understanding them. In the world of postmodern theory, culture is an amalgamation of images, symbols, and ideas from television programs, MTV, commercials, magazines, and other sources and conveys no essential, enduring meanings. Social divisions, where they exist, thus have no legitimacy and should be removed, eliminating barriers between races, ethnic groups, genders, cultures, nations, and academic disciplines.

In its most extreme formulations (e.g., Baudrillard, 1983, 1990), having no confidence that any social and moral principles exist to give meaning to people's lives and no hope that human beings can control the processes that oppress them, postmodernism is a very pessimistic framework (Adam and Allan, 1995; see also Sica, 1996), arguing that there is no foundation for objective, reliable knowledge about social life.

Though postmodernism has no coherent set of theoretical principles, it does point to some of the ways that contemporary societies constrain and control people, particularly through media and advertising (Ritzer, 1995, 1997), and it suggests ways people can liberate themselves. Postmodernism has also broadened sociology through its emphasis on the multidisciplinary nature of social inquiry, revitalized sociology's debunking function through the method of deconstructing texts to show their

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hidden assumptions, and encouraged continuous reexamination of basic theoretical assumptions (Ritzer, 1996b).

### Theoretical Perspectives

As we have seen, sociologists have asked fundamental questions about social life throughout the history of sociology: Why does social inequality exist? How do people learn to interact with each other and be effective participants in society? How and why do societies change? Sociologists have answered these and many more by developing social theories. No one social theory has been so successful that it has been able to eliminate its competitors and dominate the field.

There now exist many different social theories to explain many different facets of our social lives. To reduce complexity, we can combine theories with similar approaches into theoretical perspectives. A *theoretical perspective* provides a set of assumptions, interrelated concepts, and statements about how various social phenomena are related to one another.

An important development of 20th-century sociology was the emergence of three general theoretical perspectives. The adherents of each perspective ask somewhat different questions about society and provide different views of social life. We do not need to accept only one model and reject all the others; rather, theoretical perspectives are tools—mental constructs—that allow us to visualize something. Any model necessarily limits our experience and presents just one angle on a concept, but a good model also *increases* what we can see by providing rules of inference through which new relationships can be discovered and suggestions about how the scope of a theory can be expanded.

The three contemporary theoretical perspectives in sociology are: *functionalism*,

which emphasizes order and stability; *conflict theory*, which focuses on inequality, exploitation, oppression, social turmoil, and social change; and *symbolic interactionism*, which argues that society emerges from and is changed by the process of human beings interacting with one another using symbols based in shared meanings. Together, these three perspectives form the theoretical background of most current sociological work. We will be returning to them throughout the book. For now, let us briefly examine each in turn.

### The Functionalist Perspective

The structural-functional—or, more simply, functionalist—perspective draws substantially upon the ideas of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Émile Durkheim. Its theorists take a broad view of society and focus on the macro aspects of social life. In the 1950s and early 1960s the functionalist theories of Talcott Parsons (1949, 1951) and his students occupied center stage in American sociology. Indeed, some proponents such as Kingsley Davis (1959) argued that the approach was essentially synonymous with sociology.

#### ▲ Society as a Social System

Functionalists take as their starting point the notion that society is a *system*, a set of elements or components that are related to one another in a more or less stable fashion through a period of time. Functionalists focus on the parts of society, particularly its major institutions, such as the family, religion, the economy, the state, and education. They identify the structural characteristics of each part much as biologists describe the principal features of the body's organs. They then determine what the functions of each part are.

One of the features of a system stressed by functionalists is its tendency toward equilibrium, or balance, among its parts and among the forces operating on it. Change in

one part has implications for other parts and for the community or society as a whole, with change and adaptation being a continuous process. Some parts may also change more rapidly than others, contributing to social dislocations. For example, as increasing numbers of mothers with preschool children enter the paid labor force, new arrangements are required to take care of their children during the day. Yet licensed day care facilities are currently available for fewer than one-third of the children with mothers in the labor force. Many children—as many as 75 percent of those from low-income homes—are currently receiving inadequate care (U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995).

### ▲ Functions and Dysfunctions

Within system analysis, functionalists pay particular attention to the **functions** performed by a system's parts, especially organizations, groups, institutions, and cultural patterns. Functionalists say that if a system is to survive, certain essential tasks must be performed; otherwise, the system fails to maintain itself and perishes. If society is to exist, its members must make provision for certain functional requirements. Institutions, to be discussed in p. 59 → more detail in Chapter 2, are the principal structures whereby these critical tasks for social living—functions—are organized, directed, and executed. Each institution, such as education, the economy, and the family, is built around a standardized solution to a set of problems. Functions are the observed consequences of the existence of institutions, groups, and other system parts that permit the adaptation or adjustment of a system (Merton, 1968).

Robert K. Merton (1968) pointed out that just as institutions and the other parts of society can contribute to the maintenance of the social system, they can also have negative consequences. Those observed consequences that lessen the adaptation or adjustment of a system

he terms **dysfunctions**. Poverty, for example, has both functional and dysfunctional properties (Gans, 1972). It is functional because it ensures that the nation's "dirty work" is done—those jobs that are physically dirty, dangerous, temporary, dead-end, poorly paid, and menial. Poverty also creates jobs for those who serve the poor or who "shield" the rest of the population from them: police, social workers, loan sharks, and drug pushers. However, poverty is dysfunctional because it intensifies a variety of social problems, including those associated with health, education, crime, and drug addiction. And the victims of poverty often experience a sense of alienation from society that leads them to withhold their loyalty from the system.

### ▲ Manifest and Latent Functions

Merton (1968) also distinguished between manifest functions and latent functions. **Manifest functions** are those consequences that are intended and recognized by the participants in a system; **latent functions** are those consequences that are neither intended nor recognized. This distinction draws our attention to the fact that people's conscious motivations for engaging in a behavior are not necessarily identical with the behavior's objective consequences and helps to clarify what otherwise may seem to be irrational social patterns. Some ceremonies of the Hopi Indians of the Southwest, for example, are designed to produce rain. Though these rituals do not actually produce rain, their latent function is to produce a collective expression by which the Hopi people achieve a sense of social solidarity. What outsiders may see as irrational behavior (performing a rain ceremony) is actually functional for the group itself.

### ▲ Social Consensus

Functionalists also assume that most members of a society agree on what is desirable, worthwhile, and moral, and what is undesirable,

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worthless, and evil. Through a social learning process, they come to share a consensus regarding their core values and beliefs. For example, most Americans accept the values and beliefs inherent in democracy, the doctrine of equal opportunity, and the notion of personal achievement. Functionalists say that this high degree of consensus on basic values provides the foundation for social integration and stability in U.S. society.

### ▲ Evaluation of the Functionalist Perspective

The functionalist perspective is a useful tool for describing society and identifying its structural parts and the functions of these parts at a particular point in time. It provides a “big picture” of the whole of social life, particularly as it finds expression in patterned, recurrent behavior and institutions. For some purposes, it is clearly helpful to have a clear description of the parts that make up society and how they fit together.

However, such an approach does not provide us with the entire story of social life. The functionalist approach has difficulty dealing with history and processes of social change. In the real world, societies are constantly changing, but functionalism has done a poor job of accounting for the never-ending flow of interaction that occurs among people. Moreover, the functionalist perspective tends to exaggerate consensus, integration, and stability while disregarding conflict, dissent, and instability. The problems that structural-functional theory has in dealing with change, history, and conflict have led critics to charge that it has a conservative bias and that it tends to support existing social arrangements.

## The Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists, like functionalists, focus their attention on society as a whole, studying its institutions and structural arrangements. Yet the two perspectives are at odds on a good

many matters. Where functionalists depict society in relatively static terms, conflict theorists emphasize the processes of change that continually transform social life. Where functionalists stress the order and stability to be found in society, conflict theorists emphasize disorder and instability. Where functionalists see the common interests shared by the members of a society, conflict theorists focus upon the interests that divide. Where functionalists view consensus as the basis of social unity, conflict theorists insist that social unity is an illusion resting on coercion. Finally, where functionalists often view existing social arrangements as necessary and justified by the requirements of group life, conflict theorists see many of the arrangements as neither necessary nor justified.

### ▲ Diversity of Approaches

Although conflict theory derives much of its inspiration from the work of Karl Marx, it has many other sources as well, including the work of such sociologists as Georg Simmel (1908/1955, 1950), Lewis Coser (1956), and Randall Collins (1975). Although class conflict was the core of Marx’s theory, many contemporary sociologists view conflict as occurring among many groups and interests—religion versus religion, race versus race, consumers versus producers, taxpayers versus welfare recipients, sunbelt versus snowbelt states, central city residents versus suburbanites, the young versus the elderly, and so on.

### ▲ Sources of Conflict

The main source of conflict in human societies is scarcity of the resources people require, according to the conflict perspective. Wealth, prestige, and power are always in limited supply, so that gains for one individual or group are often associated with losses for others. **Power**—the ability to control the behavior of others, even against their will—determines who will gain and who will lose (Lasswell, 1936). Power also determines which group will be

able to translate its preferences for behavior (its values) into the operating rules for others. Conflict theorists ask how it is that some groups acquire power, dominate other groups, and effect their will in human affairs. In so doing, they look at who benefits and who loses from the way society is organized.

### ▲ How Society Is Possible

If social life is fractured and fragmented by confrontations between individuals or groups, how is a society possible? Functionalists say society is held together primarily by a consensus among its members regarding core values and norms, but conflict theorists reject this view. They maintain that society is often held together in the face of conflicting interests.

When one group enjoys sufficient power, it makes and enforces rules and shapes institutional life so that its interests are served. Many conflict theorists regard the state—government and the rules it creates and enforces—as an instrument of oppression employed by ruling elites for their own benefit; functionalists tend to view the state as an organ of the total society, functioning to promote social control and stability.

Many divided but overlapping interest groups generate a large number of crosscutting conflicts. People who are opponents in one conflict are allies in another. Society persists because no one conflict can become so great as to tear the society apart (Coser, 1956). For example, an African-American woman at odds with her white neighbor over affirmative action policy may agree with her about increasing funding for their neighborhood schools.

### ▲ Evaluation of the Conflict Perspective

The conflict perspective complements functionalist theory. The functionalist approach has difficulty dealing with history and social change; the conflict approach makes these matters its strength. The conflict approach has difficulty dealing with some aspects of consensus, inte-

gration, and stability; the functionalist approach affords penetrating insights.

Some sociologists contend that the functionalists and conflict theorists are simply studying two aspects of the same reality. They note that both consensus and conflict are central features of social life. In addition, both approaches have traditionally taken a holistic view of social life, portraying societies as systems of interrelated parts (van den Berghe, 1963).

Other sociologists such as Lewis Coser (1956), drawing upon the seminal work done by Georg Simmel (1908/1955), suggested that under some circumstances conflict is functional for society; it prevents social systems from becoming rigid and fixed by exerting pressure for change and innovation. The civil rights movement, although challenging established interests and racist patterns, may have contributed to the long-term stability of American institutions by bringing African Americans into the “system.”

However, it is clear that conflict can be dysfunctional for an existing system. The many destructive conflicts around the world that are preventing societies and nations from fully developing socially and economically, such as those between the Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East and between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, serve as examples.

## The Interactionist Perspective

The functionalist and conflict perspectives take a big-picture approach to sociology, focusing on the macro or large-scale structures of society. In contrast, the interactionist perspective is more concerned with the micro or small-scale aspects of social life. Sociologists like Charles Horton Cooley (1902/1964), George Herbert Mead (1934/1962), Manford Kuhn (1964), and Herbert Blumer (1969) turned their attention to the individuals who make up society and asked how social interaction is possible. Answers to this question focus on individuals’ subjective

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experiences and understandings, and especially on how shared understandings of the world emerge from social interaction and form the basis for social life. As with the functionalist and conflict perspectives, a number of themes recur in the various formulations of interactionist thought.

### ▲ Symbols

Interactionists emphasize that we are social beings who live a group existence. However, we possess few, if any, innate behaviors for relating to one another. Whatever inborn capacities we have seem to require exposure to others to fully develop; we will discuss this further in Chapter 3. If we are largely lacking in such inborn mechanisms, how is society possible? Interactionists find the answer in the ability of human beings to communicate by means of symbols. A symbol is something that stands for something else. That something else is its *meaning*. Social interaction, and therefore society itself, is possible because people share meanings. The combined emphasis on symbols and interaction gives this perspective its name: *symbolic interactionism*.

### ▲ Meaning: Constructing Reality

Symbolic interactionism is based on three core assumptions (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Fine, 1993). First, we respond to things in our environment on the basis of their meanings—that is, the understandings we have of them. Our responses differ if we see people swinging bats as playing a baseball game or as trying to hit us. Second, meanings are not inherent in things, but emerge from social interaction. Turning 16 years of age is no more meaningful than turning 15, except for the social conventions (e.g., obtaining one's driver's license) that make this a particularly meaningful birthday. Third, because we are continually interacting, shared cultural meanings are continually emerging and changing. The world we live in, therefore, is largely a social reality, manufactured by people

as they intervene in the world and interpret what is happening there using the symbols and meanings available to them. Accordingly, symbolic interactionists say that we experience the world as a **constructed reality**.

Everyday fashion is a good example. When we encounter a person dressed in a certain way, the reaction we have to the clothes they wear is not to the clothes per se, but to the meanings they symbolize. High-topped black tennis shoes, hiking boots, wing-tips, flip-flops, and Birkenstocks each have a different meaning, and the meaning shifts depending on other characteristics of the wearer, including age, gender, and race.

Symbolic interactionists also emphasize how symbols and meanings emerge to provide a more concrete reality to things that are abstract and elusive, such as societies and nations. Though it is difficult to point to a society the way we can point to a chair or a tree, we give our society a name (“the United States,” “Canada,” or “India”), we draw borders between our society and others, and we come to treat the United States, Canada, and India as objects. By acting and interacting with others as if the United States is real, we make it real. By treating society and its parts as “things,” we give them existence and continuity (Hewitt, 1979).

All this leads symbolic interactionists to say that if sociologists are to understand social life, they must understand what people actually say and do from the viewpoint of the people themselves. Put another way, sociologists must “get inside people's heads” and view the “world” as it is seen, interpreted, acted upon, and shaped by the people themselves. This orientation is strongly influenced by Max Weber's concept of *Verstehen*.

### ▲ Fashioning Behavior

Symbolic interactionists portray us as creatively constructing our actions in accordance with the meanings we attribute to a situation. In fashioning our behavior we use symbols to de-

fine our perceptual inputs, mentally outline possible responses, imagine the consequences of alternative courses of action, eliminate unlikely possibilities, and finally select the optimal mode of action (Stryker, 1980). We mentally rehearse our actions before we actually act and, upon acting, serve as audiences to our own actions. As a result, our behavior is improvised and unpredictable; we must continually create meanings and devise ways to fit our actions together (Manis and Meltzer, 1994).

We are at least as likely to shape “social structure” as to be shaped by it. Think of the social structure that is your relationship with your roommate(s). It’s unlikely that you were handed a list of rules for coexisting; rather, you have negotiated agreements, spoken and unspoken, about how to do so. Your relationship shifts and changes as you encounter problems and solve them. It is a circular process, in which social structure influences individuals and individuals influence social structure.

### ▲ Evaluation of the Interactionist Perspective

The interactionist perspective has the advantage of bringing “people” into the panorama of sociological investigation. From interactionists we gain an image of human beings as active agents who fashion their behavior, as opposed to an image of individuals who simply respond passively in a manner prescribed by social rules and institutional arrangements. This perspective directs our attention to the activities of individuals as they go about their everyday lives. Through interaction they acquire the symbols and the meanings that allow them to interpret situations, assess the advantages and disadvantages of given actions, and then select one of them.

However, the interactionist perspective has its limitations. First, there is the temptation to conclude that because social reality is constructed, there is no reality independent of social constructions. For example, because mental illness is a construction that emerges from a

social process of diagnosis based on socially constructed categories of illness, one may wish to argue that mental illness is not “real.” However, as philosopher John R. Searle (1995) made clear, we can understand social reality as constructed without rejecting the idea that there is a reality totally independent of us that may affect our social constructions. Second, in their everyday lives people do not enjoy total flexibility in shaping their actions. Although interactionists acknowledge that many of our actions are guided by systems of preestablished meanings, including culture and social order, many interactionists downplay the parts these larger elements play in our lives. And third, research by symbolic interactionists has often focused on narrow aspects of social life, such as nude beaches, the relationships between prostitutes and truck drivers, and the definition of reality created from the time a parachutist leaves the plane until he or she reaches the ground.

To rectify some of these problems a number of sociologists (Collins, 2000; Fine, 1993; Stryker, 1980, 1987) have introduced structural and large-scale components into interactionist thought by linking social structure to the individual and by showing that the intertwined patterns of action and interaction form the foundation for groups and societies.

## Using the Three Perspectives

The details of and contrasts among the three sociological perspectives will become clearer as we see how they operate in the chapters to come. As we noted, each theoretical approach has its advantages and its disadvantages. (Table 1.1 is a summary of the major theoretical perspectives.) Each portrays a different aspect of reality and directs our attention to some dimension of social life that the other neglects or overlooks.

Let’s look at how each perspective might describe poverty. As we discussed earlier, functionalism highlights the functions and dysfunctions of poverty in terms of the operation of the

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**Table 1.1 Major Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology**

	Functionalist	Conflict	Interactionist
<i>Primary level of analysis</i>	Macro	Macro	Micro
<i>Nature of society</i>	A set of interacting parts	A set of competing interest groups	A social reality that is created and recreated in social interaction
<i>Foundations of social interaction</i>	Consensus of shared beliefs and values	Conflict, coercion, and power	Shared meanings
<i>Focus of study</i>	Social order	Social conflict and social change	The dynamic interplay between the individual and society
<i>Advantages</i>	An understanding of social structure and social stability	Uncovers historical processes that lead to social change	An understanding of human beings as active agents in social life
<i>Disadvantages</i>	Ineffective in dealing with social change	A weak understanding of social consensus and social stability	Has difficulty dealing with social structure

larger society. Conflict theorists portray the inequalities that flow from the way society is organized and show who gains and who loses from these arrangements. Interactionists suggest that people define certain circumstances as deviating from what they perceive to be an ideal standard of living, assign an unfavorable meaning to these conditions, and apply the label “poverty” to them. Each approach offers a somewhat different insight.

Further, each perspective affords a more effective approach, a better “fit,” to some kinds of data—some aspects of social life—than other perspectives do. Each approach need not preclude the accuracy of another perspective in explaining given data or predicting particular outcomes. Indeed, each approach is useful precisely because it provides us with some piece of information regarding the exceedingly complex puzzle of social life. All three perspectives are useful sociological tools for describing and analyzing human behavior.

## Conducting Research

The sociologists we have considered have provided us with important theories regarding the nature and workings of social life. A *theory* is a general framework or perspective that provides an explanation for a specific social phenomenon. However, as most sociologists would agree, theory unconfirmed by facts has little solid value. We require both theoretical understanding *and* facts; for this reason, both theory and research are essential components of the sociological enterprise. Theory inspires research that can verify or disprove it. Research provides findings that permit us to accept, reject, or modify our theoretical formulations, while simultaneously challenging us to craft new and better theories.

Research also provides the information needed to formulate public policy. Many basic human problems are products of social relations

and human behavior. For example, behavior patterns account for at least half of the fatalities in 7 of the 10 largest categories of causes of death in the United States. This finding might be used to argue that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) allot more money to research on human behavior; currently only 4 percent of NIH's budget goes to such research (Raymond, 1990). Sociological research can provide citizens, policy makers, and public officials with basic knowledge to fashion solutions to social problems such as poverty, drug abuse, gender inequality, and racism.

In this section we will discuss the logic of science, define a number of research methods, list the steps in the scientific method, and consider research ethics.

## The Logic of Science

Science makes the assumption that every event or action results from an antecedent cause. Indeed, a primary objective of science is to determine what causes what. Sociologists assume that crime, racism, social inequality, and marriages do not simply happen, but that they have causes. Moreover, they assume that under identical conditions, the same cause will always produce the same effect. Sociologists, like other scientists, proceed on the assumption that cause-and-effect relationships prevail in the universe.

Scientists also assume that truth can be empirically tested; data can be gathered and analyzed by means of careful observation and measurement. According to this view, the facts discovered by one scientist can be verified by other scientists. For example, if it is true that people behave differently in the presence of others than when alone, then any social scientist who investigates this using careful observation and measurement will obtain the same results.

However, science is not a collection of research findings; science is a *process*, itself a form of social behavior (Kuhn, 1962; Cole, 1992). The people who practice science are products of their own societies and of the

groups to which they belong. As a result, scientists are subject to a variety of social influences in addition to their core scientific values and principles. These other factors, self-interests, and biases may shape a scientist's research design, collection of data, and interpretation of results. Clearly, Max Weber's call for a value-free sociology is a difficult goal to achieve. However, the importance of objectivity is not that it is always realized in science, but that it is an important goal toward which all scientists are committed to working.

## How Do Sociologists Collect Data?

Sociologists must collect facts to support or dispute theories and to answer questions about social life. They employ four major techniques of data collection: experiments, surveys, observation, and archival research. Before describing each of these, let's define some important scientific terms.

### ▲ Basic Concepts in Research

Scientists look for relationships among variables. A **variable** is a concept that can take on different values. Scientists use this term to refer to something that they think influences (or is influenced by) something else. The variables sociologists typically study have to do with social statuses, conditions, attitudes, and behaviors. In studying political behavior, for example, sociologists might examine variables such as differences in race, gender, age, religion, and socioeconomic standing.

In investigating cause-and-effect relationships, scientists distinguish between the independent and the dependent variable. An **independent variable** is one that *causes* an effect. The **dependent variable** is the variable that *is affected*. The causal variable (the independent variable) precedes in time the phenomenon it causes (the dependent variable). For example, as the education level of women (independent variable) increases, the mortality rate of their

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infants decreases (dependent variable). In their research, scientists attempt to predict the relationship they will find between the independent and dependent variables. Such a statement—or **hypothesis**—is a proposition that can then be tested to determine its validity.

In testing a hypothesis, scientists try to determine the degree of association that exists between an independent and a dependent variable. If the variables are causally related, then they must be correlated with one another. A **correlation** exists if a change in one variable is associated with a change in the other variable. Because the mortality rate of infants decreases as the education level of women increases, for example, the two variables are said to be *correlated*.

Correlation, however, does not establish causation (Cole, 1972). For example, the death rate is considerably higher among hospitalized individuals than among nonhospitalized individuals. Yet we would be wrong to conclude on the basis of this correlation that hospitals cause death. Likewise, the amount of damage resulting from a fire is closely associated with the number of fire engines that are on the scene. Again, we would be wrong to conclude that fire engines cause greater fire damage. The latter two examples are cases of a **spurious correlation**—the apparent relationship between the two variables is produced by a third variable that influences the original variables. Severe sickness is associated both with admission to hospitals and with death; similarly, a large, uncontrolled fire is associated both with extensive damage and the mobilization of multiple firefighting units. To reduce the likelihood that their research will be contaminated by third variables, scientists employ *controls*, a matter we will discuss below when we deal with experimentation.

### ▲ Methods of Research

■ **Experiments** The experiment is the ideal design for scientific research because it best provides researchers with data that enable them

to accept or reject a hypothesis. To obtain such data, scientists must try to control all the relevant variables to eliminate other explanations for their findings. Though not perfect, the *experiment* best meets this requirement. In an experiment, researchers work with two groups that are made to be identical in all relevant respects through a process of random assignment. For example, in an experiment on voter preferences, the two groups studied would need to be of the same size, and their members should reflect a similar socioeconomic, gender, and racial mix. Researchers introduce a change in one group—the **experimental group**—but not in the other group—the **control group**. The two groups are identical except for the factor that the researchers introduce in the experimental group. The control group affords a neutral standard against which the changes in the experimental group can then be measured.

Experiments allow sociologists to test the effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable. In our voter preference example, one group might be asked to watch a series of television commercials on candidates, while the other would spend the same amount of time watching videos unrelated to voting. The effects of television commercials (independent variable) on voter preference (dependent variable) could then be measured.

We commonly think of experiments as being performed in a laboratory setting, which is the case for much medical research and for a good deal of the research done by psychologists and social psychologists. However, sociologists also do *field experiments* in which the independent variable is manipulated in a natural setting rather than in a laboratory. This enables researchers to observe various forms of social behavior under conditions in which they normally occur. In a laboratory study, subjects know they are being observed and thus may display the behavior they believe is desirable. This makes studying some social responses such as helping behavior difficult in the laboratory.



*The survey researcher depicted here is gathering data from the respondent through an interview.*

Although the field experiment combines the strict rules of experimentation with a natural setting, it does have disadvantages (Deaux and Wrightsman, 1984). In the field, researchers have no control over unexpected intrusions that may reduce or destroy the effectiveness of the changes they make in the independent variable. Further, it is often difficult to use random assignment in field experiments to ensure that the control group and experimental group are identical.

■ **Surveys.** Some objects of study, such as people's values, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, motivations, and feelings, are not directly accessible to observation. Others, such as sexual activity, health, religious practices, and drug use, are often sensitive, private matters. Under these circumstances the **survey** is a valuable tool in the researcher's arsenal.

Survey data are typically gathered in one of two ways. Researchers interview people by reading them questions from a prepared ques-

tionnaire, or people can receive a questionnaire in the mail, fill it out, and return it by mail. In either case, *self-reports* are the source of data.

In both interview and questionnaire surveys, sampling procedures are critical. If researchers need information about a large population, they do not need to contact every member of that population. Instead, they can draw on a small but *representative sample*, a sample that accurately reflects the composition of the general public. Public opinion pollsters such as the Gallup, Harris, and CBS News organizations employ a small sample of approximately 1,500 individuals to tap the opinions of more than 260 million Americans. Similarly, physicians need only a small sample of your blood to run tests and draw conclusions about the composition of all your blood and thus about your health.

Sociologists typically employ either a random sample or a stratified random sample in their research. In the **random sample**, researchers select subjects on the basis of chance

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so that every individual in the population has the same opportunity to be chosen. A **stratified random sample** provides greater precision. Researchers divide the population into relevant categories, such as age, gender, socioeconomic level, and race, and draw a random sample from each of the categories. If African Americans constitute 12 percent of the population and Hispanics 9 percent, African Americans will comprise 12 percent of the sample and Hispanics 9 percent.

Designing good questionnaires is not easy. The wording of the questions, their number, and the format in which they appear are all critical matters. For example, the wording of a question may systematically bias the answers. A New York Times/CBS News survey found that only 29 percent of respondents said they favored a constitutional amendment “prohibiting abortions.” But in response to a later question in the same survey, 50 percent said they favored an amendment “protecting the life of an unborn child”—which amounts to the same thing (Dionne, 1980). Politicians have tried to use this tactic to their advantage (Deaux and Wrightsman, 1984; Bradburn and Sudman, 1988). For example, a survey item that begins “I agree that Candidate X” is more likely to produce a positive response than a question that begins “Does Candidate X.” Pretesting is required to ensure that questions are understandable, unbiased, and specific enough to elicit the desired information.

Probably the major difficulty with self-report information has to do with the issue of its accuracy (Stone et al., 1999). Because individuals are involved in the data they are reporting, they may intentionally or unwittingly supply biased reports. They may withhold or distort information because, even though many surveys are anonymous, telling the truth can cause people to feel threatened or embarrassed. In addition, many people lack the insight required to provide certain kinds of information. And at least 10 percent of the population lacks the literacy necessary to comprehend even the simplest question.

An increasing problem with survey research is the difficulty in finding respondents. From 20 to 70 percent of the people who receive a questionnaire in the mail fail to complete or return it, distorting the sample’s representativeness. More and more Americans are refusing to answer surveys (Goyder, 1987; Rothenberg, 1990; Dillman, 1991).

■ **Observation.** As baseball’s Yogi Berra once observed, “You can observe a lot just by watching.” Observation—watching—is a primary tool of sociological inquiry. Observation becomes a scientific technique when it (1) serves a clear research objective, (2) is undertaken in a systematic rather than haphazard manner, (3) is carefully recorded, (4) is related to a broader body of sociological knowledge and theory, and (5) is subjected to the same checks and controls applied to all types of scientific evidence (Sellitz, Wrightsman, and Cook, 1976).

Sociologists typically observe people in one of two ways. They may observe the activities of people without intruding or participating in the activities, a procedure termed **unobtrusive observation**. Or sociologists may engage in activities with the people that they are studying, a technique called **participant observation**. Elliot Liebow’s (1967) study of the African-American streetcorner men, which we discussed earlier in the chapter, involved participant observation. Liebow, a white, began his study by striking up a friendship with an African-American man, Tally Jackson, at the New Deal Carry-out Shop. Over the next several weeks Liebow often ate at the Carry-out. The streetcorner men were at first suspicious of Liebow, but Tally eased their distrust by, in effect, sponsoring Liebow as his friend.

Within a few months Liebow was well enough known and accepted by the streetcorner men to go to their rooms or apartments, needing neither an excuse nor an explanation for doing so. Clearly an outsider, Liebow (1967:253) reflected on his acceptance by the group:

*[B]ut I also was a participant in a full sense of the word. The people I was observing knew that I was observing them, yet they allowed me to participate in their activities and take part in their lives to a degree that continues to surprise me.*

In many situations observation is the only way to gather data. At times people are unable or unwilling to tell about their behavior: As we have said, they may lack sufficient insight to report on it or, because their behavior is illicit, taboo, or deviant, they may be reluctant to do so. For instance, we may wish to get answers to such questions as, Why and how are people drawn to crack and heroin? How is the drug market structured? How does drug use affect the social and economic life of the community? What is its role in crime and violence? Some of the most informative answers to these questions have come from researchers who have undertaken unobtrusive observation while living and working in drug-ridden communities (Holden, 1989; Anderson, 1990). But observation has limitations similar to those for field experiments: Researchers have no control over unexpected intrusions, and groups or individuals observed may not be representative of others. Additionally, there is the practical problem of applying observational procedures to phenomena that occur over a long period, such as a certain historical era. For these types of investigation, archival data are particularly useful.

### ■ ***Comparative and Historical Research.***

We may learn a good deal about work, sexual behavior, family life, leisure, and other matters within the United States and other Western societies. But do these insights hold for non-Western peoples? And do they hold for earlier historical periods? To answer these sorts of questions, sociologists need to look to other societies and other historical periods to test their ideas. Comparative and historical research is well suited to the task. One approach involves

archival research. **Archival research** refers to the use of existing records that have been produced or maintained by persons or organizations other than the researcher. Census data, government statistics, newspaper reports, books, magazines, personal letters, speeches, folklore, court records, works of art, and the research data of other social scientists are all sources for archival research. A new utilization of data already collected for some other purpose may have considerable value and merit.

Comparative and historical materials have provided us with valuable insights on issues relating to the nation-state. A good illustration is sociologist Theda Skocpol's landmark study, *States and Social Revolution* (1979). In this study Skocpol looked for similarities in the societal conditions that existed at the time of the French (1787–1800), Russian (1917–1921), and Chinese (1911–1949) revolutions, comparing them with conditions in nations where revolutions failed or did not take place. Skocpol traced the roots of these revolutions to the political crises that developed when long-term international conflicts resulted in military defeat at the same time that domestic class tensions, particularly those between landowners and peasants, made the peasants receptive to revolutionary activity. Skocpol's comparative historical analysis led her to conclude that successful social revolutions pass through three stages: An old regime's state apparatus collapses; the peasantry mobilizes in class-based uprisings; and a new elite consolidates political power.

Archival research has the advantage of allowing researchers to test hypotheses over a wider range of time and societies than would otherwise be possible. We gain greater confidence in the validity of a hypothesis when we can test it in a number of cultures and historical periods rather than restrict ourselves to a single group in the present time and place. However, the technique also has its disadvantages. The major problem is that missing or inaccurate records often prevent an adequate test. And when

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material is available, it is frequently difficult to categorize in a way that gives an answer to a research question (Deaux and Wrightsman, 1984).

■ **Feminist Research Methods** Feminism not only is having a strong impact on contemporary social theory, as noted earlier in this chapter, but it also is having an important influence on how sociologists do research. Feminist methodology includes a commitment to three goals: (1) to include women's lives in social research and reveal the diversity in the way women actually live their lives, uncovering what has previously been ignored, censored, and suppressed; (2) to minimize harm by avoiding exploitation of research subjects and by limiting the negative consequences of research; and (3) to focus research efforts so that results will promote social change, reduce inequality, and be of value to women (DeVault, 1996).

Though many feminist researchers have done important and influential research using observational methods to examine women's experiential, subjective, and emotional lives, Joey Sprague and Mary K. Zimmerman (1993) stressed that the important contributions of feminist methodology are:

1. To create an objective account of social life while being sensitive to the subjective experience of those we study.
2. To develop abstract theories without losing sight of the real concrete lives of people.
3. To recognize the importance of rationality in social life without ignoring the importance of emotion.
4. To realize that both statistical analysis of quantitative data and qualitative observation can reveal important insights about women's and men's social lives.

In sum, feminist methodology is not a particular method of doing research but an approach that emphasizes inclusion, fairness, and humanness, as well as the pursuit of all evidence that can be used to transform society and women's lives.

■ **Multiple Methods** Many methods are used to gather data in sociology, some radically different from others. Some research problems can be studied only with certain methods. The study of sociocultural change over hundreds of years, for example, requires the use of comparative historical analysis of archival data. But if we want to know how employment affects the mental health of U.S. women in the paid labor force today, we would use field observation and survey methods. Using multiple methods, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, can give us a more complete answer to our research question; different methods provide different windows on reality. As Peggy Thoits (1995) showed in her study, what we find with one method may be made understandable by examining data collected using another method. For her study of stresses and psychological symptoms, simply examining the average symptom level associated with each stressor was not enough; she needed to know the context in which stresses had occurred. Divorce, for example, might come as a devastating shock to one person and as a welcome relief to another, depending on each person's particular situation, and only Thoits's qualitative analysis of more extended comments from respondents and interviewers allowed her to interpret her data accurately. Box 1.2 provides a more detailed look at how a researcher selects research methods.

### Steps in the Scientific Method: A Close-up Look

The *scientific method*, a series of steps that seeks to ensure maximum objectivity in investigating a problem, allows researchers to pursue answers to their questions by gathering evidence in a systematic manner. Although no single method can eliminate uncertainty, the steps embodied in the scientific method maximize the chances for deriving information that is relevant, unbiased, and economical. The scientific method relies on the rigorous and disciplined

collection of facts and on the logical explanation of them. Its steps include selecting a researchable problem, reviewing the literature, formulating a hypothesis, choosing a research design, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and stating conclusions.

Ideally sociological research follows this step-by-step procedure, although in practice it is not always possible. Let's examine each step in Figure 1.1 as we follow a study of criminal behavior by three social scientists, Julie Horney, D. Wayne Osgood, and Ineke Haen Marshall (1995).

### 1. Selecting a Researchable Problem.

The range of topics available for social research is as broad as the range of human behavior. Sociologists focus on research problems that merit study and that can be investigated by the methods of science. Horney and her colleagues were intrigued by the great stability of patterns of criminal behavior; people who establish patterns of criminal activity in their youth tend to follow these patterns throughout their lives. Is this because some people have a basic propensity to commit crime? Or do patterns of life circumstances that weaken or strengthen social bonds influence patterns of criminal offending?

**2. Reviewing the Literature.** Horney and her colleagues surveyed the research literature dealing with criminal offending. This told them about other research that had been undertaken, suggested a variety of leads, and saved them from duplicating work others had already done. Their literature review uncovered two patterns of findings. One set of studies showed that people who commit crimes when they are juveniles are much more likely to commit crimes as adults, strongly supporting the conclusion "that a basic propensity to commit crime is established early in life and persists throughout the life course," with life events having little or no effect on adult crime. This idea is called the *criminal propensity*

*perspective*. Another set of studies showed that people with strong social bonds (such as marriage) and important commitments (such as going to school and being employed) commit less crime. These studies, which suggested that patterns of offending should change over a person's life, support a *social control theory*, or perspective, of crime (see Chapter 5): that pp. 150-52 social bonds prevent criminal offending (Hirschi, 1969).

**3. Formulating a Hypothesis.** After reviewing the literature, researchers form a hypothesis regarding the relationship they believe exists between variables. A hypothesis can take the form of a predictive statement or of a question. Horney and her associates asked whether the likelihood of criminal offending (the dependent variable) is affected by formal and informal mechanisms of social control (independent variables). Answering this question would enable the researchers to decide which alternative view of crime was more plausible. If, for example, they found that having strong family relationships was followed by a reduced likelihood of committing a crime, this would support a social control perspective. A finding of no relationship between social bonds and the likelihood of crime would support the criminal propensity perspective.

Before undertaking their research, however, researchers must define their variables. In developing **operational definitions**, scientists take abstract concepts and put them in a form that permits their measurement. In this case the researchers specified how "strengthening and weakening of social bonds" and "committing a crime" would be measured. For this study, crime was operationally defined as committing any of nine felonies (auto theft, burglary, personal robbery, business robbery, theft, assault, forgery, fraud, and drug dealing). Horney's *operational hypothesis*—a hypothesis stated in terms of measurable variables—was this:

## 1.2 DOING SOCIAL RESEARCH



## Finding Out about Nannies

Mention nannies and most of us probably think of Mary Poppins, nanny of the Walt Disney movie of the same name, or Maria, the nun-turned-nanny in *The Sound of Music*. But sociologist Julia Wrigley wanted to find out about real nannies—the women hired to take care of the children of well-to-do parents in the United States. Wrigley knew that many in-home caregivers are “worlds removed . . . in background and education” from the families they serve, and she wondered how parents and employees managed their relationships across such a great divide. How does a sociological researcher go about investigating such a question?

Wrigley faced significant problems in finding out about nannies and their relationships with their employers. Random-sample survey methods wouldn't help her; women who work as nannies are such a small percentage of the

population that a randomly selected sample would not include enough of them to study. Historical research data were inappropriate; Wrigley was interested in present-day nannies. Performing an experiment was not feasible; Wrigley had no way of choosing two groups of nannies “identical in all relevant respects,” and her research was so explorative, she could not develop specific research questions that could be answered experimentally.

Wrigley chose to combine two sociological field methods: *intensive interviewing* and *participant observation*. Working with graduate student research assistants, she conducted 177 tape-recorded interviews, each one usually lasting several hours. Employers—the parents hiring the nannies—were selected from two different neighborhoods in each of two major cities, New York and

Los Angeles. Wrigley chose those particular cities because both are ports of entry to the United States, and census data revealed that they had different types of immigrant populations, which would allow her to investigate a variety of sources of cultural differences. She found parents to interview through neighborhood contacts, referrals, and organizations of women lawyers and doctors.

Finding the nannies was tougher. “Many work illegally and are wary of strangers with tape recorders,” says Wrigley in *Other People's Children*, the book that describes her study. She was able to locate employees to interview through employers, immigrant social service agencies, neighborhood contacts, and referrals from one caregiver to the next. Because of her interest in the cultural differences between employer and employee, she selected caregivers from a variety of

The likelihood of committing any of nine different felonies is affected by living with a spouse or partner, being employed, going to school, being on probation or parole, drinking heavily, or using drugs.

**4. Choosing a Research Design.** Once researchers have formulated their hypothesis, they have to determine how they will collect the data that will provide a test of it. Horney and her colleagues decided to con-

duct interviews with newly convicted male offenders and ask them about events and criminal behaviors in their lives over the two calendar years preceding the year of the arrest that led to their incarceration.

**5. Collecting the Data.** The actual collection of the data plays a critical part in the research enterprise. Horney and her associates conducted interviews with 658 male offenders sentenced to the Nebraska Department

backgrounds. The final sample included interviews with workers from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Western European countries, Ireland, England, Jamaica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Barbados, as well as African-Americans and white women from the American Midwest.

Wrigley began learning about the lives of her subjects even before she began interviewing them:

The limits on caregivers' freedom became graphically evident during interviewing. Many live-in workers were not allowed to receive phone calls. Even when they said their employers did not mind their taking calls, it was seldom comfortable having the calls go through the employer. With live-in workers, even finding a place to hold the interview was a problem. . . . Occasionally employers interrupted the interviews. . . . At the end of (one) interview, the caregiver whispered that her

employer understood Spanish, so she had not felt able to talk freely.

In contrast, Wrigley commented, "Interviewing employers was much easier. Although busy, they had command of their own schedules and houses. Only one person contacted declined to be interviewed."

Because of the difficulties of interviewing the caregivers, Wrigley also relied on participant observation. She explained the benefits of that method:

I also met with caregivers informally when they picked children up from school, when they sat in parks, and when they talked together at children's gymnastics or dance classes. Occasionally caregivers arranged gatherings, where I could talk with several at once and listen to their own conversations. These occasions were always valuable, because they allowed a spontaneous

quality that could be missing from interviews. Caregivers discussed things I would not have asked about. . . . They also advised one another on how to deal with difficult employers and revealed their feelings about particular tasks employers wanted them to do.

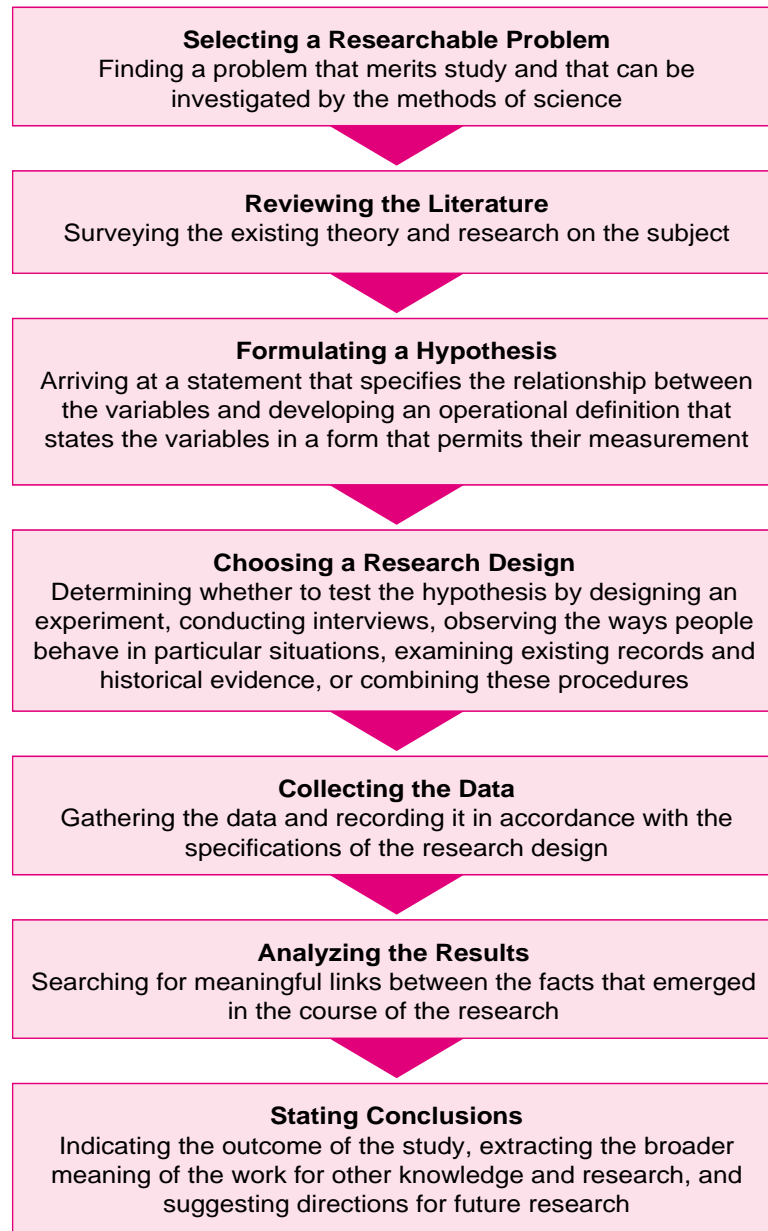
Wrigley's findings would not have come to light without the use of her chosen research methods. As she explained, "While nannies are a common sight in the parks of big cities, pushing children on swings and talking to one another, most of their work is performed out of view even of their employers. No government agencies regulate their labor or even count them. . . . The nannies themselves . . . are not organized in any formal network."

*Excerpts from Other People's Children by Julia Wrigley. Copyright © by BasicBooks, Inc. Reprinted by permission of BasicBooks, a subsidiary of Perseus Books Group, LLC.*

of Correctional Services. Because the offenders were reporting on their own past behavior, some of it criminal, the investigators had to work to gain and maintain the confidence of their subjects to assure honest reporting. The survey instrument included an "event calendar" and a "crime calendar," which allowed the researchers to record life circumstances and criminal behavior during the months covered by the study.

**6. Analyzing the Data.** Once researchers have their data, they must analyze them to find answers to the questions posed by their research project. Analysis involves a search for meaningful links among the facts that have emerged in the course of the research. Horney and her colleagues chose an analysis that would show whether changes in life circumstances were correlated with committing criminal acts at a later time. Further, in

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**Figure 1.1** The Steps in the Scientific Method

The chart shows the steps researchers commonly follow in investigating a problem.

order to rule out criminal propensity as a cause of both the life changes and the criminal acts, they examined these correlations within three subsets of offenders, those with low, medium, and high rates of criminal offending. The findings of this study showed that regardless of overall levels of offending, men were less likely to commit crimes when living with a wife and/or attending school. Illegal drug use, heavy drinking, and living with a girlfriend all were associated with higher rates of offending.

- 7. Stating Conclusions.** After completing their analysis of the data, researchers are ready to state their conclusions. They typically accept, reject, or modify their hypothesis. Additionally, researchers usually seek to extract broader meaning from their work by linking it to other knowledge and theory. In this case, Horney and her colleagues found that “changes in offending systematically follow changes in . . . life circumstances.” Their results support social control theory by showing that, even among men with a strong propensity to commit crime, the strengthening and weakening of social bonds affects the likelihood of criminal activity. Criminal acts, therefore, are not produced just by the propensity to commit crime. “Our results,” they concluded, “suggest that differences [in the propensity to commit crime] among individuals combine with their shifting social environments to produce current levels of criminal activity.”

## Research Ethics

Though scientific research on human beings is potentially valuable and important, it also can be dangerous and harmful to the people who are studied. We were reminded of this by former President Clinton’s 1997 apology for U.S. government studies that purposely withheld treatment from poor, uneducated African-American men infected with syphilis and by recent revelations of government studies that exposed unknowing subjects to radiation (Pense, 1995). As

a result of such scandals, sociologists have become increasingly sensitive and committed to ethical considerations in their research.

Yet sociologists confront a dilemma in conducting research. On the one hand, they must not distort or manipulate their findings to serve untruthful, personal, or institutional ends. On the other hand, they are obligated to consider people as ends and not means.

Because of the possible conflicts between these various responsibilities, the American Sociological Association (1989), the major professional organization for the discipline in the United States, has provided a code of ethics to govern the behavior of its members. Among these principles are the following:

- *Sociologists should not misuse their positions as professional social scientists for fraudulent purposes or as a pretext for gathering intelligence for any organization or government. Sociologists should not mislead respondents involved in a research project as to the purpose for which that research is being conducted.*
- *The process of conducting sociological research must not expose respondents to substantial risk of personal harm. Informed consent must be obtained when the risks of research are greater than the risks of everyday life. Where modest risk or harm is anticipated, informed consent must be obtained.*
- *Sociologists must not coerce or deceive students into serving as research subjects.*
- *No sociologists should discriminate in hiring, firing, promotions, salary, treatment, or any other conditions of employment or career development on the basis of sex, sexual preference, age, race, religion, national origin, handicap, or political orientation.*

In sum, because sociological knowledge can be a form of economic and political power, sociologists must exercise care to protect their discipline, the people they study and teach, and society from abuses that may stem from their professional work.

## The Chapter in Brief: *Developing a Sociological Consciousness*

### The Sociological Perspective

**Sociology** is the scientific study of social interaction and social organization.

■ ***New Levels of Reality.*** The sociological perspective encourages us to examine aspects of our social environment in ways that delve beneath the surface. As we look beyond the outer appearances of our social world, we encounter new levels of reality.

■ ***The Sociological Imagination.*** The essence of the **sociological imagination** is the ability to see our private experiences and personal difficulties as entwined with the structural arrangements of our society and the times in which we live.

■ ***Microsociology and Macrosociology.*** **Microsociology** is the detailed study of what people say, do, and think moment by moment as they go about their daily lives. **Macrosociology** focuses upon large-scale and long-term social processes of organizations, institutions, and broad social patterns.

### The Development of Sociology

■ ***Auguste Comte: The Founder of Sociology.*** Auguste Comte is commonly credited as being the founder of sociology. He emphasized that the study of society must be scientific, and he urged sociologists to employ systematic observation, experimentation, and comparative historical analysis as their methods. He divided the study of society into **social statics** and **social dynamics**.

■ ***Harriet Martineau: Feminist and Methodologist.*** Harriet Martineau wrote the first book on social research methods

and was among the first to do systematic, scientifically based, social research. Her comparative analysis of slavery and the position of women in the Western world paved the way for feminist scholarship and the further pursuit of gender equality.

■ ***Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism.*** Herbert Spencer depicted society as a system, a whole made up of interrelated parts. He also set forth an evolutionary theory of historical development. **Social Darwinism** is Spencer's application of evolutionary notions and the concept of survival of the fittest to the social world.

■ ***Karl Marx: The Role of Class Conflict.*** Karl Marx focused his search for the basic principles of history on the economic environments in which societies develop. He believed that society is divided into those who own the means of producing wealth and those who do not, giving rise to **class conflict**. **Dialectical materialism** is Marx's theory that development depends on the clash of contradictions and the creation of new, more advanced structures out of these clashes.

■ ***Émile Durkheim: Social Integration and Social Facts.*** Émile Durkheim was especially concerned with social solidarity, distinguishing between mechanical and organic solidarity. He contended that the distinctive subject matter of sociology should be the study of **social facts**.

■ ***Max Weber: Subjectivity and Social Organization.*** Max Weber said that a critical aspect of the sociological enterprise is the study of the intentions, values, beliefs, and attitudes that underlie people's behavior. He

used the word *Verstehen* in describing his approach and contributed his notions of the ideal type and a **value-free sociology**.

■ ***American Sociology.*** In the United States, sociology and the modern university system arose together. The first department of sociology was established at the University of Chicago in 1893, and Chicago served as a “social laboratory” at the beginning of the century. Midcentury sociologists crafted survey techniques and refined models of society. “New breed” sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s refined Marxism and established new research approaches and perspectives.

■ ***Contemporary Sociology.*** Contemporary movements in sociology include critical theory, feminism, and postmodern social theory.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Contemporary sociologists acknowledge three general theoretical perspectives, or ways of looking at how various social phenomena are related to one another. These are the functionalist, the conflict, and the symbolic interactionist perspectives.

■ ***The Functionalist Perspective.*** The structural-functional—or, more simply, functionalist—perspective sees society as a system. Functionalists identify the structural characteristics and **functions** and **dysfunctions** of institutions, and distinguish between **manifest functions** and **latent functions**. Functionalists also typically assume that most members of a society share a consensus regarding their core beliefs and values.

■ ***The Conflict Perspective.*** The conflict approach draws much of its inspiration from the work of Karl Marx and argues that the structure of society and the nature of social relationships are the result of past and ongoing conflicts.

■ ***The Interactionist Perspective.*** Symbolic interactionists contend that society is

possible because human beings have the ability to communicate with one another by means of symbols. They say that we act toward people, objects, and events on the basis of the meanings we impart to them. Consequently, we experience the world as **constructed reality**.

### Conducting Research

■ ***The Logic of Science.*** Sociology is a social science. Science assumes that every event or action results from an antecedent cause—that is, cause-and-effect relationships prevail in the universe. These causes and effects can be observed and measured, and sociologists look for **correlations** among **variables** as a way of doing so.

■ ***How Do Sociologists Collect Data?*** Four major techniques of data collection are available to sociologists: experiments, surveys, observation, and archival research. In the **experiment**, researchers work with an **experimental group** and a **control group** to test the effects of an **independent variable** on a **dependent variable**. Interviewing and questionnaires constitute the primary techniques used in **surveys**, using **random** or **stratified random samples**. Observation can take the form of **participant observation** or **unobtrusive observation**. Other techniques include **archival research** and feminist methodology.

■ ***Steps in the Scientific Method: A Close-up Look.*** The scientific method includes selecting a researchable problem, reviewing the literature, formulating a **hypothesis**, creating an **operational definition**, choosing a research design, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and stating conclusions.

■ ***Research Ethics*** It is important that sociologists observe the ethics of their discipline in carrying out research. They have an obligation not to expose their subjects to substantial risk or personal harm in the research process and to protect the rights and dignity of their subjects.

## Glossary

**archival research** The use of existing records that have been produced or maintained by persons or organizations other than the researcher.

**class conflict** The view of Karl Marx that society is divided into those who own the means of producing wealth and those who do not, giving rise to struggles between classes.

**constructed reality** Our experience of the world. Meaning is not something that inheres in things; it is a property that derives from, or arises out of, the interaction that takes place among people in the course of their daily lives.

**control group** The group that affords a neutral standard against which the changes in an experimental group can be measured.

**correlation** A change in one variable associated with a change in another variable.

**dependent variable** The variable that is affected in an experimental setting.

**dialectical materialism** The notion in Marxist theory that development depends on the clash of contradictions and the creation of new, more advanced structures out of these clashes.

**dysfunctions** Observed consequences that lessen the adaptation or adjustment of a system.

**economic determinist** A believer in the doctrine that economic factors are the primary determinants of the structure of societies and social change.

**experiment** A technique in which researchers work with two groups that are identical in all relevant respects. They introduce a change in one group, but not in the other group. The procedure permits researchers to test the effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable.

**experimental group** The group in which researchers introduce a change in an experimental setting.

**functions** Observed consequences that permit the adaptation or adjustment of a system.

**hypothesis** A proposition that can be tested to determine its validity.

**independent variable** The variable that causes an effect in an experimental setting.

**latent functions** Consequences that are neither intended nor recognized by the participants in a system.

**macrosociology** The study of large-scale and long-term social processes.

**manifest functions** Consequences that are intended and recognized by the participants in a system.

**microsociology** The detailed study of what individuals say, do, and think moment by moment as they go about their daily lives.

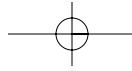
**operational definition** A definition developed by taking abstract concepts and putting them in a form that permits their measurement.

**participant observation** A technique in which researchers engage in activities with the people that they are observing.

**power** The ability to control the behavior of others, even against their will.

**random sample** A sampling procedure in which researchers select subjects on the basis of chance so that every individual in the population has the same opportunity to be chosen.

**Social Darwinism** The application of evolutionary notions and the concept of survival of the fittest to the social world.



**social dynamics** Those aspects of social life that pattern institutional development and have to do with social change.

**social facts** Those aspects of social life that cannot be explained in terms of the biological or mental characteristics of the individual. People experience the social fact as external to themselves in the sense that it has an independent reality and forms a part of their objective environment.

**social statics** Those aspects of social life that have to do with order and stability and that allow societies to hold together and endure.

**sociological imagination** The ability to see our private experiences and personal difficulties as entwined with the structural arrangements of

our society and the historical times in which we live.

**sociology** The scientific study of social interaction and social organization.

**spurious correlation** The apparent relationship between two variables produced by a third variable that influences the original variables.

**stratified random sample** A sampling procedure in which researchers divide a population into relevant categories and draw a random sample from each of the categories.

**survey** A method for gathering data on people's beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions, motivations, and feelings. The data can be derived from interviews or questionnaires.

**unobtrusive observation** A technique in which

researchers observe the activities of people without intruding or participating in the activities.

**value-free sociology** The view of Max Weber that sociologists must not allow their personal biases to affect the conduct of their scientific research.

**variable** A concept that can take on different values; the term scientists apply to something they think influences (or is influenced by) something else.

**Verstehen** An approach to the study of social life developed by Max Weber in which sociologists mentally attempt to place themselves in the shoes of other people and identify what they think and how they feel; translates roughly as "understanding."

## Internet Connection



[www.mhhe.com/hughes6](http://www.mhhe.com/hughes6)

Open the web page for the American Sociological Association, <http://www.asanet.org/>. Information is provided for sociologists, students, and the public. Click on "students" and follow the link to "Careers in Sociology." Based on what you learn about sociology and

sociological careers, think about whether you would be interested in pursuing a career in sociology. Why or why not? Write a short report on the careers that are available to people who study sociology and your thoughts about these careers.

