

The Sociological View

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On your way to work one morning, you glance around the neighborhood. You are one of only a few walkers, despite the fine fall weather. In the early morning mist, the cars on the street—mostly SUVs—are sending plumes of exhaust into the chill autumn air. Each of the small luxury trucks carries only one person. Why, you wonder, does everyone need an SUV? Why can't people carpool?

Up ahead, motorists dash to and from their cars to the convenience store across the street. You crave a cup of coffee, the gourmet kind the convenience store sells. You pick up your pace. On reaching the store you order a pricey cup of Premium Mountain Roast, whose aroma fills the warm, cozy shop. As you wait, you watch an attendant sell a lottery ticket to a woman in an old, frayed overcoat. Why, you wonder, is she spending her money on lottery tickets? She could use a new coat.

These are questions anyone with curiosity might ask. Yet there are other questions we could ask, more searching questions about the society in which these scenes take place. If air pollution is a problem,



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why doesn't the government invest more in public transportation? If gambling on the street is illegal, why is the state running a lottery—essentially a gambling business—in a convenience store? And what about that cup of premium coffee you bought? Chances are the beans were grown in Mexico, Colombia, or Guatemala, where the workers who harvested them may not have received a living wage. Why do so many of the products we buy in the United States—coffee, chocolate, sneakers—come from other nations, and why can't the workers who produce them afford to buy them?

These are a few of the questions a sociologist might ask about the scene you just witnessed. Sociologists study social patterns that many people share. As the sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote over 40 years ago, if one person is unemployed, his difficulty is a personal problem, but if thousands of people are unemployed, their difficulty is a social problem. Sociologists look for root causes of such social patterns in the way society is organized and governed (Mills [1959] 2000a).

As a field of study, sociology is extremely broad in scope. You'll see throughout this book the tremendous range of topics sociologists investigate—from tattooing to TV viewing, from neighborhood groups to global economic patterns, from peer pressure to class consciousness. Sociologists look at how other people influence your behavior; how the government, religion, and the economy affect you; and how you yourself affect others. These aren't just academic questions. Sociology matters because it illuminates your life and your world, whether you are going to school, working for pay, or raising a family.

This first chapter introduces sociology as a social science, one that is characterized by a special skill called the *sociological imagination*. We'll meet three pioneering thinkers—Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx—and discuss the theoretical perspectives that grew out of their work. We'll see how sociologists use the scientific method to investigate the many questions they pose. Sociologists use surveys, observation, experiments, and existing sources in their research; they often wrestle with ethical issues that arise during their studies. We'll examine some practical uses for their research at the end of the chapter.

What Is Sociology?

Sociology is the systematic study of social behavior and human groups. It focuses primarily on the influence of social relationships on people's attitudes and behavior and on how societies are established and change. This textbook deals with such varied topics as families, the workplace, street gangs, business firms, political parties, genetic engineering, schools, religions, and labor unions. It is concerned with love, poverty, conformity, discrimination, illness, technology, and community.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

In attempting to understand social behavior, sociologists rely on an unusual type of creative thinking. C. Wright Mills described such thinking as the *sociological imagination*—an awareness of the relationship between an individual and the wider society. This awareness allows all of us (not just sociologists) to comprehend the links between our immediate, personal social settings and the remote, impersonal social world that surrounds us and helps to shape us (Mills [1959] 2000a).

A key element in the sociological imagination is the ability to view one's own society as an outsider would, rather than only from the perspective of personal experiences and cultural biases. Consider something as simple as the practice of eating while walking. In the United States people think nothing of consuming coffee or chocolate as they walk along the street. Sociologists would see this as a pattern of acceptable behavior because others regard it as acceptable. Yet sociologists need to go beyond one culture to place the practice in perspective. This "normal" behavior is quite unacceptable in some other parts of the world. For example, in Japan people do not eat while walking. Streetside sellers and vending machines dispense food everywhere, but the Japanese will stop to eat or drink whatever they buy before they continue on their way. In their eyes, to engage in another activity while eating shows disrespect for the food preparers, even if the food comes out of a vending machine.

The sociological imagination allows us to go beyond personal experiences and observations to understand broader public issues. Divorce, for example, is unquestionably a personal hardship for a husband and wife who split apart. However, C. Wright Mills advocated using the sociological imagination to view divorce not simply as the personal problem of a particular man or woman, but rather as a societal concern. From this perspective, an increase in the divorce rate serves to redefine a major social institution, the family. Today, households frequently include stepparents and half-sisters or -brothers whose parents have divorced and remarried.

Sociological imagination can bring new understanding to daily life around us. Since 1992, sociologists David Miller and Richard Schaefer (this textbook's author) have studied the food bank system of the United States, which distributes food to hungry individuals and families. On the face of it, food banks seem above reproach. After all, as Miller and Schaefer learned in their research, more than one out of four children in the United States is hungry. One-third of the nation's homeless people report eating one meal per day or less. What could be wrong with charities redistributing to pantries and shelters food that used to be destined for landfills? In 2003, for example, Second Harvest, a food distribution organization, redistributed 1.8 billion pounds of food from hundreds of individual and corporate donors to more than 50,000 food pantries, soup kitchens, and social service agencies.

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Many observers would uncritically applaud the distribution of tons of food to 26 million needy Americans. But let's look deeper. While supportive of and personally involved in such efforts, Miller and Schaefer (1993) have drawn on the sociological imagination to offer a more probing view of these activities. They note that powerful forces in our society—such as the federal government, major food retailers, and other large corporations—have joined in charitable food distribution arrangements. Perhaps as a result, the focus of such relief programs is too restricted. The homeless are to be fed, not housed; the unemployed are to be given meals, not jobs. Relief efforts assist hungry individuals and families without challenging the existing social order (for example, by demanding a redistribution of wealth). Of course, without these limited successes in distributing food, starving people might assault patrons of restaurants, loot grocery stores, or literally die of starvation on the steps of city halls and across from the White House. Such critical thinking is typical of sociologists, as they draw on the sociological imagination to study a social issue—in this case, hunger in the United States (Second Harvest 2003).



You attend a rock concert one night and a religious service the next morning. What differences do you see in how the two audiences behave and in how they respond to the leader? What might account for these differences?

The sociological imagination is an empowering tool. It allows us to look beyond a limited understanding of things to see the world and its people in a new way and through a broader lens than we might otherwise use. It may be as simple as understanding why a roommate prefers country music to hip hop, or it may open up a whole different way of understanding whole populations in the world. For example, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, many citizens wanted to understand how Muslims throughout the world perceived their country, and why. From time to time this textbook will offer you the chance to exercise your own sociological imagination in a variety of situations. We'll begin with one that may be close to home for you.

SOCIOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Is sociology a science? The term *science* refers to the body of knowledge obtained by methods based on systematic observation. Like researchers in other scientific disciplines, sociologists engage in organized, systematic study of phenomena (in this case, human behavior) in order to enhance understanding. All scientists, whether studying mushrooms or murderers, attempt to collect precise information through methods of study that are as objective as possible. They rely on careful recording of observations and accumulation of data.

Of course, there is a great difference between sociology and physics, between psychology and astronomy. For this reason, the sciences are commonly divided into natural and social sciences. *Natural science* is the study of the physical features of nature and the ways in which they interact and change. Astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, and physics are all natural sciences. *Social science* is the study of various

aspects of human society. The social sciences include sociology, anthropology, economics, history, psychology, and political science.

These social science disciplines have a common focus on the social behavior of people, yet each has a particular orientation. Anthropologists usually study past cultures and preindustrial societies that continue today, as well as the origins of men and women. Economists explore the ways in which people produce and exchange goods and services, along with money and other resources. Historians are concerned with the peoples and events of the past and their significance for us today. Political scientists study international relations, the workings of government, and the exercise of power and authority. Psychologists investigate personality and individual behavior. So what does *sociology* focus on? It emphasizes the influence that society has on people's attitudes and behavior and the ways in which people shape society. Humans are social animals; therefore, sociologists scientifically examine our social relationships with others.

Let's consider how the different social sciences might approach the hotly debated issue of handgun control. Many people today, concerned about the misuse of firearms in the United States, are calling for restrictions on the purchase and use of handguns. Political scientists studying this issue would look at the impact of political action groups, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), on lawmakers. Historians would examine how guns were used over time in our country and elsewhere. Anthropologists would focus on the use of weapons in a variety of cultures as means of protection as well as symbols of power. Psychologists would look at individual cases and assess the impact handguns have on their owners as well as on individual victims of gunfire. Economists would be interested in how the manufacture and sale of firearms affect communities.

And what approach would sociologists take? They might look at who owns handguns in the United States. They would ask: What explains the significant gender, racial, age, and geographic differences in gun ownership? How would these differences affect the formulation of social policy by city, state, and federal governments? They would examine data from different states to evaluate the effect of gun restrictions on the incidence of firearm accidents or violent crimes involving firearms. They would consider how cultural values and media portrayals influence people's desire to own firearms. Sociologists might also look at data that show how the United States compares to other nations in handgun ownership and use.

SOCIOLOGY AND COMMON SENSE

Sociology focuses on the study of human behavior. Yet we all have experience with human behavior and at least some knowledge of it. All of us might well have theories about why people buy lottery tickets, for example, or why people become homeless. Our theories and opinions typically come from "common sense"—that is, from our experiences

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and conversations, from what we read, from what we see on television, and so forth.

In our daily lives, we rely on common sense to get us through many unfamiliar situations. However, this commonsense knowledge, while sometimes accurate, is not always reliable, because it rests on commonly held beliefs rather than on systematic analysis of facts. It was once considered “common sense” to accept the idea that the earth was flat—a view rightly questioned by Pythagoras and Aristotle. Incorrect commonsense notions are not just a part of the distant past; they remain with us today.

In the United States, “common sense” tells us that religious fervor has been rising among young adults. “Common sense” tells us that people panic when faced with natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, or in the wake of tragedies such as the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001. However, these particular “commonsense” notions—like the notion that the earth is flat—are untrue; neither of them is supported by sociological research.

What *does* research have to tell us about these questions? Through 2003, annual surveys of first-year college students show a decline in the percentage who attend religious services even occasionally. Increasing numbers of college students claim to have no religious preference. The trend encompasses not just organized religion but other forms of spirituality as well. Fewer students pray or meditate today than in the past, and fewer consider their level of spirituality to be very high (Sax et al. 2003).

Similarly, disasters do not generally produce panic. In the aftermath of natural disasters and even explosions, greater social organization and structure emerge to deal with a community’s problems. In the United States, an emergency operations group often coordinates public services, as well as certain services normally performed by the private sector, such as food distribution. Decision making becomes more centralized.

Like other social scientists, sociologists do not accept something as a fact because “everyone knows it.” Instead, each piece of information must be tested and recorded, then analyzed in relationship to other data. Sociologists rely on scientific studies in order to describe and understand a social environment. At times, the findings of sociologists may seem like common sense because they deal with aspects of everyday life. The difference is that such findings have been *tested* by researchers. Common sense now tells us that the earth is round. But this particular commonsense notion is based on centuries of scientific work that upholds the breakthroughs made by Pythagoras and Aristotle.

What Is Sociological Theory?

Why do people commit suicide? One traditional commonsense answer is that people inherit the desire to kill themselves. Another view is that sunspots drive people to take their own lives. These explanations may

not seem especially convincing to contemporary researchers, but they represent beliefs widely held as recently as 1900.

Sociologists are not particularly interested in why any one individual commits suicide; they are more concerned with identifying the social forces that systematically cause some people to take their own lives. In order to undertake this research, sociologists develop a theory that offers a general explanation of suicidal behavior.

We can think of theories as attempts to explain events, forces, materials, ideas, or behavior in a comprehensive manner. Within sociology, a *theory* is a set of statements that seeks to explain problems, actions, or behavior. An effective theory may have both explanatory and predictive power. That is, it can help us to see the relationships among seemingly isolated phenomena, as well as to understand how one type of change in an environment leads to others.

Émile Durkheim ([1897] 1951) looked into suicide data in great detail and developed a highly original theory about the relationship between suicide and social factors. He was primarily concerned not with the personalities of individual suicide victims, but rather with suicide *rates* and how they varied from country to country. As a result, when he looked at the number of reported suicides in France, England, and Denmark in 1869, he noted the total population of each country so that he could determine the rate of suicide in each. He found that whereas England had only 67 reported suicides per million inhabitants, France had 135 per million and Denmark had 277 per million. The question then became: "Why did Denmark have a comparatively high rate of reported suicides?"

Durkheim went much deeper into his investigation of suicide rates; the result was his landmark work *Suicide*, published in 1897. Durkheim refused to automatically accept unproven explanations regarding suicide, including the beliefs that cosmic forces or inherited tendencies caused such deaths. Instead, he focused on such problems as the cohesiveness or lack of cohesiveness of religious, social, and occupational groups.

Durkheim's research suggested that suicide, while a solitary act, is related to group life. Protestants had much higher suicide rates than Catholics; the unmarried had much higher rates than married people; soldiers were more likely to take their lives than civilians. In addition, there seemed to be higher rates of suicide in times of peace than in times of war and revolution, and in times of economic instability and recession rather than in times of prosperity. Durkheim concluded that the suicide rate of a society reflected the extent to which people were or were not integrated into the group life of the society.

Émile Durkheim, like many other social scientists, developed a theory to explain how individual behavior can be understood within a social context. He pointed out the influence of groups and societal forces on what had always been viewed as a highly personal act. Clearly,

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Durkheim offered a more *scientific* explanation for the causes of suicide than that of sunspots or inherited tendencies. His theory has predictive power, since it suggests that suicide rates will rise or fall in conjunction with certain social and economic changes.

The Development of Sociology

People have always been curious about sociological matters—such as how we get along with others, what we do for a living, and whom we select as our leaders. Philosophers and religious authorities of ancient and medieval societies made countless observations about human behavior. They did not test or verify their observations scientifically; nevertheless, those observations often became the foundation for moral codes. Several of the early social philosophers predicted that a systematic study of human behavior would one day emerge. Beginning in the 19th century, European theorists made pioneering contributions to the development of a science of human behavior.

EARLY THINKERS: COMTE, MARTINEAU, AND SPENCER

The 19th century was an unsettled time in France. The French monarchy had been deposed in the revolution of 1789, and Napoleon had subsequently suffered defeat in his effort to conquer Europe. Amid this chaos, philosophers considered how society might be improved. Auguste Comte (1798–1857), credited with being the most influential of the philosophers of the early 1800s, believed that a theoretical science of society and a systematic investigation of behavior were needed to improve French society. He coined the term *sociology* to apply to the science of human behavior.

Writing in the 1800s, Comte feared that the excesses of the French Revolution had permanently impaired France's stability. Yet he hoped that the systematic study of social behavior would eventually lead to more rational human interactions. In Comte's hierarchy of sciences, sociology was at the top. He called it the "queen," and its practitioners "scientist-priests." This French theorist did not simply give sociology its name; he also presented a rather ambitious challenge to the fledgling discipline.

Scholars learned of Comte's works largely through translations by the English sociologist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). As a sociologist, Martineau was a pathbreaker in her own right. She offered insightful observations of the customs and social practices of both her native Britain and the United States. Martineau's book *Society in America* ([1837] 1962) examines religion, politics, child rearing, and immigration in the young nation. Martineau gives special attention to social class distinctions and to such factors as gender and race.

Martineau's writings emphasized the impact that the economy, law, trade, and population could have on the social problems of contemporary society. She spoke out in favor of the rights of women, the emancipation of slaves, and religious tolerance. In Martineau's (1896) view, intellectuals and scholars should not simply offer observations of social conditions; they should act on their convictions in a manner that will benefit society. That is why Martineau conducted research on the nature of female employment and pointed to the need for further investigation of the issue (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998).

Another important contributor to the discipline of sociology was Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). A relatively prosperous Victorian Englishman, Spencer (unlike Martineau) did not feel compelled to correct or improve society; instead, he merely hoped to understand it better. Drawing on Charles Darwin's study *On the Origin of Species*, Spencer applied the concept of evolution of the species to societies in order to explain how they change, or evolve, over time. Similarly, he adapted Darwin's evolutionary view of the "survival of the fittest" by arguing that it is "natural" that some people are rich while others are poor.

Spencer's approach to societal change was extremely popular in his own lifetime. Unlike Comte, Spencer suggested that since societies are bound to change eventually, one need not be highly critical of present social arrangements or work actively for social change. This viewpoint appealed to many influential people in England and the United States who had a vested interest in the status quo and were suspicious of social thinkers who endorsed change.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM

Émile Durkheim made many pioneering contributions to sociology, including his important theoretical work on suicide. The son of a rabbi, Durkheim (1858–1917) was educated in both France and Germany. He established an impressive academic reputation and was appointed one of the first professors of sociology in France. Above all, Durkheim will be remembered for his insistence that behavior must be understood within a larger social context, not just in individualistic terms.

As one example of this emphasis, Durkheim ([1912] 2001) developed a fundamental thesis to help understand all forms of society. Through intensive study of the Arunta, an Australian tribe, he focused on the functions that religion performs and underscored the role that group life plays in defining what we consider to be religious. Durkheim concluded that like other forms of group behavior, religion reinforces a group's solidarity.

Like many other sociologists, Durkheim did not limit his interests to one aspect of social behavior. Later in this book, we will consider his thinking on crime and punishment, religion, and the workplace. Few sociologists have had such a dramatic impact on so many different areas within the discipline.

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MAX WEBER

Another important early theorist was Max Weber (pronounced “vay-ber”). Born in Germany in 1864, Weber studied legal and economic history, but he gradually developed an interest in sociology. Eventually, he became a professor at various German universities. Weber taught his students that they should employ *Verstehen*, the German word for “understanding” or “insight,” in their intellectual work. He pointed out that we cannot analyze much of our social behavior by the same criteria we use to measure weight or temperature. To fully comprehend behavior, we must learn the subjective meanings people attach to their actions—how they themselves view and explain their behavior.

We also owe credit to Weber for a key conceptual tool: the ideal type. An *ideal type* is a construct, a made-up model that serves as a measuring rod against which actual cases can be evaluated. In his own works, Weber identified various characteristics of bureaucracy as an ideal type (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). In presenting this model of bureaucracy, Weber was not describing any particular organization, nor was he using the term *ideal* in a way that suggested a positive evaluation. Instead, his purpose was to provide a useful standard for measuring how bureaucratic an actual organization is (Gerth and Mills 1958). Later in this textbook, we will use the concept of an ideal type to study the family, religion, authority, and economic systems and to analyze bureaucracy.

KARL MARX

Karl Marx (1818–1883) shared with Durkheim and Weber a dual interest in abstract philosophical issues and the concrete reality of everyday life. Unlike them, Marx was so critical of existing institutions that a conventional academic career was impossible for him. He spent most of his life in exile from his native Germany.

Marx’s personal life was a difficult struggle. When a paper that he had written was suppressed, he fled to France. In Paris, he met Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), with whom he formed a lifelong friendship. The two lived at a time when European and North American economic life was increasingly dominated by the factory rather than the farm.

In 1847, Marx and Engels attended secret meetings in London of an illegal coalition of labor unions known as the Communist League. The following year, they prepared a platform called *The Communist Manifesto*, in which they argued that the masses of people who have no resources other than their labor (whom they referred to as the *proletariat*) should unite to fight for the overthrow of capitalist societies.

In Marx’s analysis, society was fundamentally divided between classes that clash in pursuit of their own class interests. When he examined the industrial societies of his time, such as Germany, England, and the United States, he saw the factory as the center of conflict between the

exploiters (the owners of the means of production) and the exploited (the workers). Marx viewed these relationships in systematic terms; that is, he believed that an entire system of economic, social, and political relationships maintained the power and dominance of the owners over the workers. Consequently, Marx and Engels argued, the working class needed to *overthrow* the existing class system. Marx's influence on contemporary thinking has been dramatic. His writings inspired those who were later to lead communist revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

Even apart from the political revolutions that his work fostered, Marx's significance is profound. Marx emphasized the *group* identifications and associations that influence an individual's place in society. This area of study is the major focus of contemporary sociology. Throughout this textbook, we will consider how membership in a particular gender classification, age group, racial group, or economic class affects a person's attitudes and behavior. In an important sense, we can trace this way of understanding society back to the pioneering work of Karl Marx.

MODERN DEVELOPMENTS

Sociology today builds on the firm foundation developed by Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. However, the discipline has certainly not remained stagnant over the last 100 years. While Europeans have continued to make contributions, sociologists from throughout the world, and especially the United States, have advanced sociological theory and research. Their new insights have helped us to better understand the workings of society.

Charles Horton Cooley. Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) was typical of the sociologists who came to prominence in the early 1900s. Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Cooley received his graduate training in economics, but later became a sociology professor at the University of Michigan. Like other early sociologists, he had become interested in this “new” discipline while pursuing a related area of study.

Cooley shared the desire of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx to learn more about society. But to do so effectively, he preferred to use the sociological perspective to look first at smaller units—intimate, face-to-face groups such as families, gangs, and friendship networks. He saw these groups as the seedbeds of society, in the sense that they shape people's ideals, beliefs, values, and social nature. Cooley's work increased our understanding of groups of relatively small size.

Jane Addams. In the early 1900s, many leading sociologists in the United States saw themselves as social reformers dedicated to systematically studying and then improving a corrupt society. They were genuinely concerned about the lives of immigrants in the nation's growing

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cities, whether those immigrants came from Europe or from the rural American south. Early female sociologists, in particular, often took active roles in poor urban areas as leaders of community centers known as settlement houses. For example, Jane Addams (1860–1935), a member of the American Sociological Society, cofounded the famous Chicago settlement, Hull House.

Addams and other pioneering female sociologists commonly combined intellectual inquiry, social service work, and political activism—all with the goal of assisting the underprivileged and creating a more egalitarian society. For example, working with the Black journalist and educator Ida Wells-Barnett, Addams successfully prevented racial segregation in the Chicago public schools. Addams's efforts to establish a juvenile court system and a women's trade union also reveal the practical focus of her work (Addams 1910, 1930; Deegan 1991; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998).

By the middle of the 20th century, however, the focus of the discipline had shifted. Sociologists for the most part restricted themselves to theorizing and gathering information; the aim of transforming society was left to social workers and others. This shift away from social reform was accompanied by a growing commitment to scientific methods of research and to value-free interpretation of data. Not all sociologists were happy with this emphasis. A new organization, the Society for the Study of Social Problems, was created in 1950 to deal more directly with social inequality and other social ills.

Robert Merton. Sociologist Robert Merton (1910–2003) made an important contribution to the field by successfully combining theory and research. Born in 1910 to Slavic immigrant parents in Philadelphia, Merton subsequently won a scholarship to Temple University. He continued his studies at Harvard, where he acquired his lifelong interest in sociology. Merton's teaching career was based at Columbia University.

Merton produced a theory that is one of the most frequently cited explanations of deviant behavior. He noted different ways in which people attempt to achieve success in life. In his view, some may deviate from the socially agreed-upon goal of accumulating material goods or the socially accepted means of achieving that goal. For example, in Merton's classification scheme, "innovators" are people who accept the goal of pursuing material wealth but use illegal means to do so, including robbery, burglary, and extortion. Merton based his explanation of crime on individual behavior—influenced by society's approved goals and means—yet it has wider applications. It helps to account for the high crime rates among the nation's poor, who may see no hope of advancing themselves through traditional roads to success. Chapter 4 discusses Merton's theory in greater detail.

Today sociology reflects the diverse contributions of earlier theorists. As sociologists approach such topics as divorce, drug addiction, and

religious cults, they can draw on the theoretical insights of the discipline's pioneers. A careful reader can hear Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Cooley, Addams, and many others speaking through the pages of current research. Sociology has also broadened beyond the intellectual confines of North America and Europe. Contributions to the discipline now come from sociologists studying and researching human behavior in other parts of the world. In describing the work of today's sociologists, it is helpful to examine a number of influential theoretical approaches (also known as *perspectives*).

Major Theoretical Perspectives

Sociologists view society in different ways. Some see the world basically as a stable and ongoing entity. They are impressed with the endurance of the family, organized religion, and other social institutions. Some sociologists see society in terms of many groups in conflict, competing for scarce resources. To other sociologists, the most fascinating aspects of the social world are the everyday, routine interactions among individuals that we often take for granted. These three views, the ones most widely used by sociologists, are the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives. Together, they will provide an introductory look at the discipline.

FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Think of society as a living organism in which each part of the organism contributes to its survival. This view is the *functionalist perspective* (also referred to as the *structural functionalist approach*). The functionalist perspective emphasizes the way that the parts of a society are structured to maintain its stability.

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), a Harvard University sociologist, was a key figure in the development of functionalist theory. Parsons had been greatly influenced by the work of Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and other European sociologists. For over four decades, Parsons dominated sociology in the United States with his advocacy of functionalism. He saw any society as a vast network of connected parts, each of which helps to maintain the system as a whole. According to the functionalist approach, if an aspect of social life does not contribute to a society's stability or survival—if it does not serve some identifiably useful function or promote value consensus among members of a society—it will not be passed on from one generation to the next.

Let's examine prostitution as an example of the functionalist perspective. Why is it that a practice so widely condemned continues to display such persistence and vitality? Functionalists suggest that prostitution satisfies needs that may not be readily met through more socially

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acceptable forms of behavior, such as courtship or marriage. The “buyer” receives sex without any responsibility for procreation or sentimental attachment; at the same time, the “seller” makes a living through the exchange.

Such an examination leads us to conclude that prostitution does perform certain functions that society seems to need. However, that is not to suggest that prostitution is a desirable or legitimate form of social behavior. Functionalists do not make such judgments. Rather, advocates of the functionalist perspective hope to explain how an aspect of society that is so frequently attacked can nevertheless manage to survive (K. Davis 1937).

Manifest and Latent Functions. A college catalog typically states various functions of the institution. It may inform you, for example, that the university intends to “offer each student a broad education in classical and contemporary thought, in the humanities, in the sciences, and in the arts.” However, it would be quite a surprise to find a catalog that declared, “This university was founded in 1895 to keep people between the ages of 18 and 22 out of the job market, thus reducing unemployment.” No college catalog will declare that as the purpose of the university. Yet societal institutions serve many functions, some of them quite subtle. The university, in fact, *does* delay people’s entry into the job market.

Robert Merton (1968) made an important distinction between manifest and latent functions. *Manifest functions* of institutions are open, stated, conscious functions. They involve the intended, recognized consequences of an aspect of society, such as the university’s role in certifying academic competence and excellence. By contrast, *latent functions* are unconscious or unintended functions that may reflect hidden purposes of an institution. One latent function of universities is to hold down unemployment. Another is to serve as a meeting ground for people seeking marital partners.

CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE

In contrast to the functionalists’ emphasis on stability and consensus, conflict sociologists see the social world in continual struggle. Proponents of the *conflict perspective* assume that social behavior is best understood in terms of conflict or tension between competing groups. Such conflict need not be violent; it can take the form of labor negotiations, party politics, competition between religious groups for members, or disputes over the federal budget.

Throughout most of the 1900s, advocates of the functionalist perspective had the upper hand among sociologists in the United States. However, proponents of the conflict approach have become increasingly persuasive since the late 1960s. The widespread social unrest resulting from battles over civil rights, bitter divisions over the war in Vietnam,

the rise of the feminist and gay liberation movements, the Watergate scandal, urban riots, and confrontations at abortion clinics offered support for the conflict approach—the view that our social world is characterized by continual struggle between competing groups. Currently, sociologists accept conflict theory as one valid way to gain insight into a society.

The Marxist View. As we saw earlier, Karl Marx viewed the struggle between social classes as inevitable, given the exploitation of workers under capitalism. Expanding on Marx's work, sociologists and other social scientists have come to see conflict not merely as a class phenomenon but as a part of everyday life in all societies. In studying any culture, organization, or social group, sociologists want to know who benefits, who suffers, and who dominates at the expense of others. They are concerned with the conflicts between women and men, parents and children, cities and suburbs, and Whites and Blacks, to name only a few. Conflict theorists are interested in how society's institutions—including the family, government, religion, education, and the media—may help to maintain the privileges of some groups and keep others in a subservient position. Their emphasis on social change and the redistribution of resources makes conflict theorists more “radical” and “activist” than functionalists (Dahrendorf 1959).

A Different Voice: W. E. B. Du Bois. One important contribution of conflict theory is that it has encouraged sociologists to view society through the eyes of those segments of the population that rarely influence decision making. Some Black sociologists, including W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), conducted research that they hoped would assist in the struggle for a racially egalitarian society. Du Bois believed that knowledge was essential to combating prejudice and achieving tolerance and justice. Sociologists, he contended, must draw on scientific principles to study social problems such as those experienced by Blacks in the United States, in order to separate accepted opinion from fact. He himself documented Blacks' relatively low status in Philadelphia and Atlanta. Through his in-depth studies of urban life, both White and Black, Du Bois made a major contribution to sociology.

Du Bois had little patience for theorists such as Herbert Spencer, who seemed content with the status quo. He believed that the granting of full political rights to Blacks in the United States was essential to their social and economic progress. Because many of his ideas challenged the status quo, he did not find a receptive audience within either the government or the academic world. As a result, Du Bois became increasingly involved with organizations whose members questioned the established social order, and he helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, better known as the NAACP (Lewis 1994, 2000).

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The increasingly diverse views within sociology in recent years have led to some valuable research, especially for African Americans. For many years, African Americans were understandably wary of participating in medical research studies, because those studies had been used for such purposes as justifying slavery or determining the impact of untreated syphilis. Now, however, African American sociologists and other social scientists are working to involve Blacks in useful ethnic medical research on such diseases as diabetes and sickle cell anemia, two disorders that strike Black populations especially hard (Young and Deakins 2001).

Feminist Perspective. Sociologists began embracing the feminist perspective in the 1970s, although it has a long tradition in many other disciplines. Proponents of the *feminist perspective* view inequity based on gender as central to all behavior and organization. Because this perspective clearly focuses on one aspect of inequality, it is often allied with the conflict perspective. But unlike conflict theorists, those who hold to the feminist perspective tend to focus on the relationships of everyday life, just as interactionists would. Drawing on the work of Marx and Engels, many contemporary feminist theorists view women's subordination as inherent in capitalist societies. Some radical feminist theorists, however, view the oppression of women as inevitable in *all* male-dominated societies, including those labeled as *capitalist*, *socialist*, and *communist*.

Feminist scholarship has broadened our understanding of social behavior by taking it beyond the White male point of view. For example, a family's social standing is no longer defined solely by the husband's position and income. Feminist scholars have not only challenged stereotyping of women; they have argued for a gender-balanced study of society in which women's experiences and contributions are as visible as those of men (England 1999; Komarovsky 1991; Tuchman 1992).

INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Workers interacting on the job, encounters in public places like bus stops and parks, behavior in small groups—these are all aspects of microsociology that catch the attention of interactionists. Whereas functionalist and conflict theorists both analyze large-scale, societywide patterns of behavior, proponents of the *interactionist perspective* generalize about everyday forms of social interaction in order to understand society as a whole. In the 1990s, for example, the workings of juries became a subject of public scrutiny. High-profile trials ended in verdicts that left some people shaking their heads. Long before jury members were being interviewed on their front lawns following trials, interactionists tried to better understand behavior in the small-group setting of a jury deliberation room.

While the functionalist and conflict approaches were initiated in Europe, interactionism developed first in the United States. George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is widely regarded as the founder of the

interactionist perspective. Mead taught at the University of Chicago from 1893 until his death. His sociological analysis, like that of Charles Horton Cooley, often focused on human interactions within one-to-one situations and small groups. Mead was interested in observing the most minute forms of communication—smiles, frowns, the nodding of one’s head—and in understanding how such individual behavior was influenced by the larger context of a group or society. Despite his innovative views, Mead only occasionally wrote articles, and never a book. He was an extremely popular teacher; in fact, most of his insights have come to us through edited volumes of lectures that his students published after his death.

Interactionism is a sociological framework in which human beings are seen to be living in a world of meaningful objects. These “objects” may include material things, actions, other people, relationships, and even symbols. The interactionist perspective is sometimes referred to as the *symbolic interactionist perspective*, because interactionists see symbols as an especially important part of human communication. Symbols carry shared social meanings that are generally recognized by all members of a society. However, some symbols carry different meanings for different groups of people. To some people in the United States, for example, the Confederate flag symbolizes respect for their rich cultural heritage; to others, it represents the subjugation of their civil rights.

Different cultures may use different symbols to convey the same idea. For example, consider the different ways various societies portray suicide without the use of words. People in the United States point a finger at the head (shooting); urban Japanese bring a fist against the stomach (stabbing); and the South Fore of Papua, New Guinea, clench a hand at the throat (hanging). These symbolic interactions are classified as a form of *nonverbal communication*, which can include many other gestures, facial expressions, and postures.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Which perspective should a sociologist use in studying human behavior? Functionalist? Conflict? Interactionist? Feminist? In fact, sociologists make use of all the perspectives summarized in Table 1–1 (see page 18), since each offers unique insights into the same issue. We can gain the broadest understanding of our society, then, by drawing on all the major perspectives, noting where they overlap and where they diverge.

Although no one approach is “correct,” and sociologists draw on all of them for various purposes, many sociologists tend to favor one particular perspective over others. A sociologist’s theoretical orientation influences his or her approach to a research problem in important ways. The choice of what to study, how to study it, and what questions to pose (or not to pose) can all be influenced by a researcher’s theoretical orientation. In the next part of this chapter, we will see how sociologists have



What symbols at your college or university have special meaning for students?

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summingUP

Table 1-1 Comparing Major Theoretical Perspectives

	Functionalist	Conflict	Interactionist
<i>View of society</i>	Stable, well integrated	Characterized by tension and struggle between groups	Active in influencing and affecting everyday social interaction
<i>View of the individual</i>	People are socialized to perform societal functions	People are shaped by power, coercion, and authority	People manipulate symbols and create their social worlds through interaction
<i>View of the social order</i>	Maintained through cooperation and consensus	Maintained through force and coercion	Maintained by shared understanding of everyday behavior
<i>View of social change</i>	Predictable, reinforcing	Change takes place all the time and may have positive consequences	Reflected in people's social positions and their communications with others
<i>Example</i>	Public punishments reinforce the social order	Laws reinforce the positions of those in power	People respect laws or disobey them based on their own past experience

adapted the scientific method to their discipline and how they apply that method in surveys, case observations, and experiments. Bear in mind, though, that even with meticulous attention to all the steps in the scientific method, a researcher's work will always be guided by his or her theoretical viewpoint. Research results, like theories, shine a spotlight on one part of the stage, leaving other parts in relative darkness.

What Is the Scientific Method?

Like all of us, sociologists are interested in the central questions of our time. Is the family falling apart? Why is there so much crime in the United States? Is the world lagging behind in its ability to feed the population? Such issues concern most people, whether or not they have academic training. However, unlike the typical citizen, the sociologist is committed to using the scientific method in studying society. The *scientific method* is a systematic, organized series of steps that ensures maximum objectivity and consistency in researching a problem.

Many of us will never actually conduct scientific research. Why, then, is it important that we understand the scientific method? Because it plays a major role in the workings of our society. Residents of the United States are constantly being bombarded with "facts" or "data." A television reporter informs us that "one in every two marriages in this country now ends in divorce." An advertiser cites supposedly scientific studies to prove that a

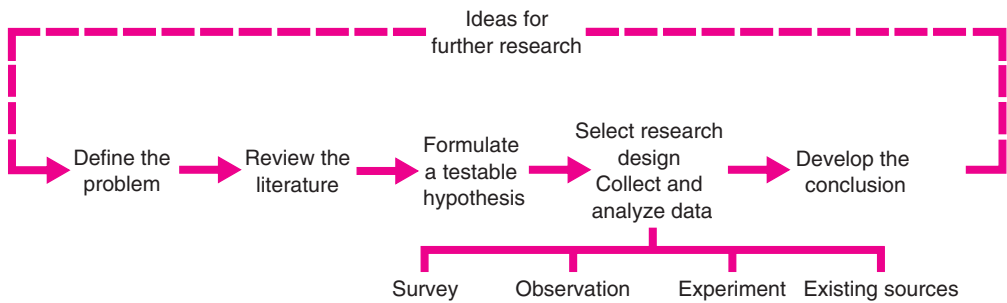


Figure 1–1
The Scientific Method

particular product is superior. Such claims may be accurate or exaggerated. We can better evaluate such information—and will not be fooled so easily—if we are familiar with the standards of scientific research. These standards are quite stringent and demand as strict adherence as possible.

The scientific method requires precise preparation in developing useful research. Otherwise, the research data collected may not prove accurate. Sociologists and other researchers follow five basic steps in the scientific method: (1) defining the problem, (2) reviewing the literature, (3) formulating the hypothesis, (4) selecting the research design and then collecting and analyzing data, and (5) developing the conclusion (see Figure 1–1). We'll use an actual example to illustrate the workings of the scientific method.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Does it “pay” to go to college? Some people make great sacrifices and work hard to get a college education. Parents borrow money for their children’s tuition. Students work part-time jobs or even take full-time positions while attending evening or weekend classes. Does it pay off? Are there monetary returns for getting that degree?

The first step in any research project is to state as clearly as possible what you hope to investigate—that is, *define the problem*. In this instance, we are interested in knowing how schooling relates to income. We want to find out the earnings of people with different levels of formal schooling. Early on, any social science researcher must develop an operational definition of each concept being studied. An **operational definition** is an explanation of an abstract concept that is specific enough to allow a researcher to assess the concept. For example, a sociologist interested in status might use membership in exclusive social clubs as an operational definition of status. Someone studying prejudice might consider a person’s unwillingness to hire or work with members of minority groups as an operational definition of prejudice. In our example, we need to develop two operational definitions—one for education and the other for earnings—in order to study whether it pays to get advanced educational degrees.

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Initially, we will take a functionalist perspective (although we may end up incorporating other approaches). We will argue that opportunities for more earning power are related to level of schooling and that schools prepare students for employment.

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

By conducting a *review of the literature*—the relevant scholarly studies and information—researchers refine the problem under study, clarify possible techniques to be used in collecting data, and eliminate or reduce avoidable mistakes. In our example, we would examine information about the salaries for different occupations. We would see if jobs that require more academic training are better rewarded. It would also be appropriate to review other studies on the relationship between education and income.

The review of the literature would soon tell us that many other factors besides years of schooling influence earning potential. For example, we would learn that the children of richer parents are more likely to go to college than those from modest backgrounds. As a result, we might consider the possibility that those parents may also help their children to secure better-paying jobs after graduation.

FORMULATING THE HYPOTHESIS

After reviewing earlier research and drawing on the contributions of sociological theorists, the researchers may then *formulate the hypothesis*. A *hypothesis* is a speculative statement about the relationship between two or more factors known as *variables*. Income, religion, occupation, and gender can all serve as variables in a study. We can define a *variable* as a measurable trait or characteristic that is subject to change under different conditions.

Researchers who formulate a hypothesis generally must suggest how one aspect of human behavior influences or affects another. The variable hypothesized to cause or influence another is called the *independent variable*. The second variable is termed the *dependent variable* because its action “depends” on the influence of the independent variable.

Our hypothesis is that the higher one’s educational degree, the more money a person will earn. The independent variable that is to be measured is the level of educational degree. The variable that is thought to “depend” on it—income—must also be measured.

Identifying independent and dependent variables is a critical step in clarifying cause-and-effect relationships. *Causal logic* involves the relationship between a condition or variable and a particular consequence, with one event leading to the other. Under causal logic, being less integrated into society (the independent variable) may be directly related to or produce a greater likelihood of suicide (the dependent variable).

Similarly, parents' income levels (an independent variable) may affect the likelihood that their children will enroll in college (a dependent variable). Later in life, the level of education their children achieve (independent variable) may be directly related to their children's income levels (dependent variable). Note that income level can be either an independent or a dependent variable, depending on the causal relationship.

A **correlation** exists when a change in one variable coincides with a change in the other. Correlations are an indication that causality *may* be present; they do not necessarily indicate causation. For example, data indicate that working mothers are more likely to have delinquent children than are mothers who do not work outside the home. But this correlation is actually *caused* by a third variable: family income. Lower-class households are more likely to have a full-time working mother; at the same time, reported rates of delinquency are higher in that class than in other economic levels. Consequently, while having a mother who works outside the home is correlated with delinquency, it does not *cause* delinquency. Sociologists seek to identify the *causal* link between variables; they generally describe the causal link in their hypotheses.

COLLECTING AND ANALYZING DATA

How do you test a hypothesis to determine if it is supported or refuted? You need to collect information, using one of the research designs described later in the chapter. The research design guides the researcher in collecting and analyzing data.

Selecting the Sample. In most studies, social scientists must carefully select what is known as a *sample*. A **sample** is a selection from a larger population that is statistically representative of that population. There are many kinds of samples, but the one social scientists use most frequently is the random sample. In a **random sample**, every member of an entire population being studied has the same chance of being selected. Thus, if researchers want to examine the opinions of people listed in a city directory (a book that, unlike the telephone directory, lists all households), they might use a computer to randomly select names from the directory. This selection would constitute a random sample. The advantage of using specialized sampling techniques is that sociologists do not need to question everyone in a population.

It is all too easy to confuse the careful scientific techniques used in representative sampling with the many *nonscientific* polls that receive much more media attention. For example, television viewers and radio listeners are encouraged to e-mail their views on today's headlines or on political contests. Such polls reflect nothing more than the views of those who happened to see the television program (or hear the radio broadcast) and took the time, perhaps at some cost, to register their opinions. These data do not necessarily reflect (and indeed may distort) the

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views of the broader population. Not everyone has access to a television or radio or has the time to watch or listen to a program or the means and/or inclination to send e-mail. Similar problems are raised by the “mail-back” questionnaires found in many magazines and by “mall intercepts,” in which shoppers are asked about some issue. Even when these techniques include answers from tens of thousands of people, they will be far less accurate than a carefully selected representative sample of 1,500 respondents.

For the purposes of our example, we will use information collected in the General Social Survey (GSS). Since 1972, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) has conducted this national survey 24 times, most recently in 2002. Each time, a representative sample of the adult population is interviewed on a variety of topics for about one and a half hours. The author of this book examined the responses of the 2,765 people interviewed in 2002, especially concerning their level of education and income.

Ensuring Validity and Reliability. The scientific method requires that research results be both valid and reliable. **Validity** refers to the degree to which a scale or measure truly reflects the phenomenon under study. **Reliability** refers to the extent to which a measure produces consistent results. A valid measure of income depends on gathering accurate data. Various studies show that people are reasonably accurate in knowing how much money they earned in the most recent year. One problem of reliability is that some people may not *disclose* accurate information, but most do. In the General Social Survey, only 9 percent of the respondents refused to give their income, and another 5 percent said they did not know what their income was. That means 86 percent of the respondents gave their incomes, which we can assume were reasonably accurate (given their other responses about occupation and years in the labor force).

DEVELOPING THE CONCLUSION

Scientific studies, including those conducted by sociologists, do not aim to answer all the questions that can be raised about a particular subject. Therefore, the conclusion of a research study represents both an end and a beginning. It terminates a specific phase of the investigation, but it should also generate ideas for future study.

Supporting Hypotheses. In our example, we find that the data support our hypothesis: People with more formal schooling *do* earn more money. As Table 1–2 shows, as a group, those with a high school diploma earn more than those who failed to complete high school, but those with an associate’s degree earn more than high school graduates. The relationship continues through more advanced levels of schooling; those with graduate degrees earn the most.

Table 1-2 Income by Education

Income Group	Educational Level (Percentage of Graduates in Each Income Group)				
	Less Than High School Education	High School Diploma	Associate's Degree	BA/BS	Graduate Degree
Under \$15,000	50%	31%	11%	17%	11%
\$15,000–\$24,999	25	22	18	12	8
\$25,000–\$34,999	14	26	32	22	17
\$35,000–\$59,999	7	15	18	23	25
\$60,000 and over	4	6	21	26	39
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

SOURCE: Author's analysis of General Social Survey 2002 in J. A. Davis et al. 2003.

Sociological studies do not always generate data that support the original hypothesis. In many instances, a hypothesis is refuted, and researchers must reformulate their conclusions. Unexpected results may also lead sociologists to reexamine their methodology and make changes in the research design.

Controlling for Other Factors. A *control variable* is a factor held constant to test the relative impact of the independent variable. For example, if researchers wanted to know how adults in the United States feel about restrictions on smoking in public places, they would probably attempt to use a respondent's smoking behavior as a control variable. That is, how do smokers versus nonsmokers feel about smoking in public places? The researchers would compile separate statistics on how smokers and nonsmokers feel about antismoking regulations.

Our study of the influence of education on income suggests that not everyone enjoys equal educational opportunities, a disparity that is one of the causes of social inequality. Since education affects a person's income, we may wish to call on the conflict perspective to explore this topic further. What impact does a person's race or gender have? Is a woman with a college degree likely to earn as much as a man with similar schooling? Later in this textbook we will consider these other factors and variables. We will examine the impact that education has on income, while controlling for variables such as gender and race.

IN SUMMARY: THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

Let's summarize the process of the scientific method through a review of our example. We *defined a problem* (the question of whether it pays to

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get higher educational degrees). We *reviewed the literature* (other studies of the relationship between education and income) and *formulated a hypothesis* (the higher one's educational degree, the more money a person will earn). We *collected and analyzed the data*, making sure the sample was representative and the data were valid and reliable. Finally, we *developed the conclusion*: The data do support our hypothesis about the influence of education on income.

Major Research Designs

An important aspect of sociological research is deciding how to collect the data. A **research design** is a detailed plan or method for obtaining data scientifically. Selection of a research design requires creativity and ingenuity. This choice will directly influence both the cost of the project and the amount of time needed to collect the results of the research. Research designs that sociologists use regularly to generate data include surveys, observation, experiments, and existing sources.

SURVEYS

Almost all of us have responded to surveys of one kind or another. We may have been asked what kind of detergent we use, which presidential candidate we intend to vote for, or what our favorite television program is. A **survey** is a study, generally in the form of an interview or questionnaire, that provides researchers with information about how people think and act. Among the United States' best-known surveys of opinion are the Gallup poll and the Harris poll. As anyone who watches the news knows, these polls have become a staple of political life.

In preparing to conduct a survey, sociologists must not only develop representative samples; they must exercise great care in the wording of questions. An effective survey question must be simple and clear enough for people to understand it. It must also be specific enough so that there are no problems in interpreting the results. Open-ended questions ("What do you think of the programming on educational television?") must be carefully phrased to solicit the type of information desired. Surveys can be indispensable sources of information, but only if the sampling is done properly and the questions are worded accurately and without bias.

There are two main forms of surveys: the **interview**, in which a researcher obtains information through face-to-face or telephone questioning, and the **questionnaire**, a printed or written form used to obtain information from a respondent. Each of these has its own advantages. An interviewer can obtain a high response rate, because people find it more difficult to turn down a personal request for an interview than to throw away a written questionnaire. In addition, a skillful interviewer can go beyond written questions and probe for a subject's underlying feelings

and reasons. On the other hand, questionnaires have the advantage of being cheaper, especially in large samples.

Surveys are an example of *quantitative research*, in which scientists collect and report data primarily in numerical form. Most of the survey research discussed so far in this book has been quantitative. While this type of research is appropriate for large samples, it doesn't offer great depth and detail on a topic. That is why researchers also make use of *qualitative research*, which relies on what scientists see in field and naturalistic settings. Qualitative research often focuses on small groups and communities rather than on large groups or whole nations. The most common form of qualitative research is *observation*.

OBSERVATION

Investigators who collect information through direct participation in and/or closely watching a group or community under study are engaged in *observation*. This method allows sociologists to examine certain behaviors and communities that could not be investigated through other research techniques.

An increasingly popular form of qualitative research in sociology today is *ethnography*. *Ethnography* refers to the study of an entire social setting through extended, systematic observation. Typically, an ethnographic description emphasizes how the subjects themselves view their social reality. Anthropologists rely heavily on ethnography. Much as an anthropologist seeks to understand the people of some Polynesian island, the sociologist as ethnographer seeks to understand and present to us an entire way of life in some setting.

In some cases, the sociologist actually joins a group for a period to get an accurate sense of how it operates. This approach is called *participant observation*. During the late 1930s, in a classic example of participant-observation research, William F. Whyte moved into a low-income Italian neighborhood in Boston. For nearly four years he was a member of the social circle of "corner boys" that he describes in *Street Corner Society*. Whyte revealed his identity to these men and joined in their conversations, bowling, and other leisure-time activities. His goal was to gain greater insight into the community that these men had established. As Whyte (1981:303) listened to Doc, the leader of the group, he "learned the answers to questions I would not even have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interviewing basis." Whyte's work was especially valuable, since at the time, the academic world had little direct knowledge of the poor and tended to rely on the records of social service agencies, hospitals, and courts for information (Adler and Johnson 1992).

The initial challenge that Whyte faced—and that every participant observer encounters—was to gain acceptance into an unfamiliar group. It is no simple matter for a college-trained sociologist to win the trust of

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a religious cult, a youth gang, a poor Appalachian community, or a circle of skid row residents. Doing so requires a great deal of patience and an accepting, nonthreatening personality on the part of the observer.

Observation research poses other complex challenges for the investigator. Sociologists must be able to fully understand what they are observing. In a sense, then, researchers must learn to see the world as the group sees it in order to fully comprehend the events taking place around them.

EXPERIMENTS

When sociologists want to study a possible cause-and-effect relationship, they may conduct experiments. An *experiment* is an artificially created situation that allows the researcher to manipulate variables.

In the classic method of conducting an experiment, two groups of people are selected and matched for similar characteristics, such as age or education. The researchers then assign one of the groups to be the experimental group and the other to be the control group. The *experimental group* is exposed to an independent variable; the *control group* is not. Thus, if scientists were testing a new type of antibiotic drug, they would administer that drug to an experimental group but not to a control group.

Sociologists don't often rely on this classic form of experiment, because it generally involves manipulating human behavior in an inappropriate manner, especially in a laboratory setting. However, sociologists do try to re-create experimental conditions in the field. For example, they may compare children's performance in two schools that follow different curricula.

In some experiments, just as in observation research, the presence of a social scientist or other observer may affect the behavior of the people being studied. The recognition of this phenomenon grew out of an experiment conducted during the 1920s and 1930s at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company. A group of researchers set out to determine how to improve the productivity of workers at the plant. The investigators manipulated such variables as the lighting and working hours to see what impact the changes would have on productivity. To their surprise, they found that *every* step they took seemed to increase productivity. Even measures that seemed likely to have the opposite effect, such as reducing the amount of lighting in the plant, led to higher productivity.

Why did the plant's employees work harder even under less favorable conditions? Their behavior apparently was influenced by the greater attention being paid to them in the course of the research and by the novelty of being subjects in an experiment. Since that time, sociologists have used the term *Hawthorne effect* to refer to the unintended influence of observers or experiments on subjects of research, who deviate from their typical behavior because they realize that they are under observation (Lang 1992).



You are a researcher interested in the effect of TV-watching on schoolchildren's grades. How would you go about setting up an experiment to measure the effect?

USE OF EXISTING SOURCES

Sociologists do not necessarily need to collect new data in order to conduct research and test hypotheses. The term *secondary analysis* refers to a variety of research techniques that make use of previously collected and publicly accessible information and data. Generally, in conducting secondary analysis, researchers utilize data in ways unintended by the initial collectors of information. For example, census data that were compiled for specific uses by the federal government are also valuable to marketing specialists in locating everything from bicycle stores to nursing homes.

Sociologists consider secondary analysis to be *nonreactive*, since it does not influence people's behavior. For example, Émile Durkheim's statistical analysis of suicide neither increased nor decreased human self-destruction. Researchers, then, can avoid the Hawthorne effect by using secondary analysis.

Many social scientists find it useful to study cultural, economic, and political documents, including newspapers, periodicals, radio and television tapes, the Internet, scripts, diaries, songs, folklore, and legal papers, to name some examples. In examining these sources, researchers employ a technique known as *content analysis*, which is the systematic coding and objective recording of data, guided by some rationale.

Researchers today are analyzing the nature and extent of violence contained in children's television programming. In a recent study, they found that 69 percent of the shows specifically intended for children ages 12 and under contained violence. Though a comparison with non-children's programming showed little difference in the total amount of time devoted to violence, it did show that children's programs contain more scenes of violence than other programs (B. Wilson et al. 2002).

Table 1–3 on page 28 summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of the four major research designs.

Ethics of Research

A biochemist cannot inject a drug into a human being unless the drug has been thoroughly tested and the subject agrees to the shot. To do otherwise would be both unethical and illegal. Sociologists must also abide by certain specific standards in conducting research, called a *code of ethics*. The professional society of the discipline, the American Sociological Association (ASA), first published its *Code of Ethics* in 1971 (revised most recently in 1997), which put forth the following basic principles:

1. Maintain objectivity and integrity in research.
2. Respect the subject's right to privacy and dignity.
3. Protect subjects from personal harm.

Table 1-3 Major Research Designs

Method	Examples	Advantages	Limitations
Survey	Questionnaires Interviews	Yields information about specific issues	Can be expensive and time-consuming
Observation	Ethnography	Yields detailed information about specific groups or organizations	Involves months if not years of labor-intensive data gathering
Experiment	Deliberate manipulation of people's social behavior	Yields direct measures of people's behavior	Ethical limitations on the degree to which subjects' behavior can be manipulated
Existing sources/ secondary analysis	Analysis of census or health data Analysis of films or TV commercials	Cost-efficiency	Limited to data collected for some other purpose

4. Preserve confidentiality.
5. Seek informed consent when data are collected from research participants or when behavior occurs in a private context.
6. Acknowledge research collaboration and assistance.
7. Disclose all sources of financial support. (American Sociological Association 1997)

Most sociological research uses *people* as sources of information—as respondents to survey questions, subjects of observation, or participants in experiments. In all cases, sociologists need to be certain that they are not invading the privacy of their subjects. Generally, they handle this responsibility by assuring them anonymity and by guaranteeing the confidentiality of personal information.

We have examined the process of sociological research, including related ethical considerations, in detail. But not all sociologists are researchers. Some practice what has come to be known as applied sociology, or the application of sociological knowledge to real-world social problems.

Applied and Clinical Sociology

Sociology matters because it addresses real issues that affect people's lives. Many early sociologists—notably, Jane Addams and George Herbert Mead—were strong advocates for social reform. They wanted their theories and findings to be relevant to policymakers and to people's

lives in general. For instance, Mead was the treasurer of Hull House, where for many years he used his theory to improve the lives of those who were powerless (especially immigrants). He also served on committees dealing with Chicago's labor problems and with public education. Today, *applied sociology* is defined as the use of the discipline of sociology with the specific intent of yielding practical applications for human behavior and organizations.

Often, the goal of such work is to assist in resolving a social problem. For example, in the last 35 years, eight presidents of the United States have established commissions to delve into major societal concerns facing our nation. Sociologists are often asked to apply their expertise to such issues as violence, pornography, crime, immigration, and population. In Europe, both academic and governmental research departments are offering increasing financial support for applied studies.

Growing interest in applied sociology has led to such specializations as medical sociology and environmental sociology. The former includes research on how health care professionals and patients deal with disease. For example, medical sociologists have studied the social impact of the AIDS crisis on families, friends, and communities. Environmental sociologists examine the relationship between human societies and the physical environment. One focus of their work is the issue of "environmental justice" (see Chapter 10), which has been raised because researchers and community activists have found that hazardous waste dumps are especially likely to be found in poor and minority neighborhoods (M. Martin 1996).

The growing popularity of applied sociology has led to the rise of the specialty of clinical sociology. Louis Wirth (1931) wrote about clinical sociology more than 70 years ago, but the term itself has become popular only in recent years. While applied sociologists may simply evaluate social issues, *clinical sociology* is dedicated to altering social relationships (as in family therapy) or to restructuring social institutions (as in the reorganization of a medical center).

Applied sociologists generally leave it to others to act on their evaluations. By contrast, clinical sociologists take direct responsibility for implementation and view those with whom they work as their clients. This specialty has become increasingly attractive to graduate students in sociology because it offers an opportunity to apply intellectual learning in a practical way. Up to now, a shrinking job market in the academic world has made such alternative career routes appealing.

Applied and clinical sociology can be contrasted with *basic* (or *pure*) *sociology*, which seeks a more profound knowledge of the fundamental aspects of social phenomena. This type of research is not necessarily meant to generate specific applications, although such ideas may result once findings are analyzed. When Durkheim studied suicide rates, he was not primarily interested in discovering a way to eliminate suicide. In this sense, his research was an example of basic rather than applied sociology.



What issues facing your local community would you like to address with applied sociological research?

30 CHAPTER 1: THE SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW**Sociology Matters**

Sociology matters because it offers new insights into what is going on around you, in your own life as well as in the larger society. Consider the purpose of a college education:

- What are your own reasons for going to college? Are you interested only in academics, or did you enroll for the social life as well? Does your college encourage you to pursue both, and if so, why?
- How does your pursuit of a college education impact society as a whole? What are the social effects of your decision to become a student, both now and later in life, after you receive your degree?

Sociology also matters because sociologists follow a systematic research design to reach their conclusions. Consider the importance of careful research:

- Have you ever acted on incomplete information, or even misinformation? What were the results?
- What might be the result if legislators or government policy makers were to base their actions on faulty research?

CHAPTER RESOURCES**Summary**

Sociology is the systematic study of social behavior and human groups. This chapter presented a brief history of the discipline and introduced the concept of the **sociological imagination**. It surveyed sociological **theory**, including contemporary perspectives, and suggested some practical uses for theory. This chapter also presented the principles of the **scientific method** and showed how sociologists use them in their research.

1. The **sociological imagination** is an awareness of the relationship between an individual and the wider society. It is based on an ability to view society as an outsider might, rather than from the perspective of an insider.

2. Sociologists employ **theory** to explain problems, actions, or behavior. Nineteenth-century thinkers who contributed to the development of sociological theory include Émile Durkheim, who pioneered work on suicide; Max Weber, a German thinker who taught the need for *Verstehen*, or “insight,” in intellectual work; and Karl Marx, a German intellectual who emphasized the importance of class conflict.
3. Today, several theoretical perspectives guide sociological research. The **functionalist perspective** holds that society is structured in ways that maintain social stability, so that social change tends to be slow and evolutionary.
4. The **conflict perspective**, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of conflict between competing social groups, so that social change tends to be swift and revolutionary. A related perspective, the *feminist perspective*, stresses conflict based on gender inequality.
5. The **feminist perspective** stresses gender as the key to understanding social interactions. Feminist sociologists charge that too often, scholars concentrate on male social roles, ignoring male–female differences in behavior.
6. The **interactionist perspective** is concerned primarily with the everyday ways in which individuals shape their society and are shaped by it. Interactionists see social change as an ongoing and very personal process.
7. The **scientific method** includes five steps: defining the problem; reviewing the literature; formulating the *hypothesis*; selecting the **research design** and collecting and analyzing data; and developing the conclusion. The **hypothesis** states a possible relationship between two or more variables, usually one **independent variable** and a **dependent variable** that is thought to be related to it.
8. To avoid having to test everyone in a population, sociologists use a **sample** that is representative of the general population. Using a representative sample lends **validity** and **reliability** to the results of scientific research.
9. Sociologists use four major **research designs** in their work: **surveys** of the population; personal **observation** of behaviors and communities; **experiments** that test hypothetical cause-and-effect relationships; and analysis of existing sources.
10. **Applied sociology**—the practical application of the discipline to problems in human behavior and organizations—is a growing field that includes community research, environmental sociology, and **clinical sociology**.



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