

Preface

If you, like us, have found yourself searching for activities to bring into your classroom and engage your introductory sociology students, you know why we wrote this book. We knew we couldn't be alone in our quest to get students to do more than read the text—we want them to *do* sociology, to understand and apply the terms and concepts they read about and realize them in the real world. Over the course of writing and refining the manuscript, as well as reading the reviews of instructors excited to see activities many of us have been cobbling together over the years now residing within a textbook, we became even more convinced that our approach is one that offers instructors material for how they want to teach and offers students the foundational content they need in sociology, as well as engaging activities that will help them *do* sociology. The overwhelmingly enthusiastic response to the first three editions provided further evidence that this is a book that can help all sociology instructors get their students excited about sociology and what they can do with it.

Sociology in Action puts all the tools instructors need to create an active learning course into one student-friendly text. Active learning teaching techniques increase student learning, retention, and engagement with course material, but they also require more creative effort than traditional lectures. No other sociology textbook works to ease this load by providing full coverage of introductory content *and* active learning exercises fully integrated into the text (with clear instructions on how to use and assess them available through the instructor resources). *Sociology in Action* provides instructors of small, medium, large, and online introductory courses with the material they need to create learning experiences for their students, including creative, hands-on, data-analytic, and community learning activities.

A group of gifted instructors who use active learning techniques in their own classrooms has written the book's chapters. The contributors, focusing on their respective areas of expertise, expertly weave together content material, active learning exercises, discussion questions, real-world examples of sociologists in action, and information on careers that use sociology. Together, we have created a book that requires students to *do* sociology as they learn it and creates a bridge between the classroom and the larger social world.

Organization and Features

The clear organizational style of each chapter helps students follow the logic of the text and concentrate on the main ideas presented. Each chapter opens with focal learning questions, and each major section contains an active learning activity that allows students to use the information they just read and ends with review questions to remind students of the emphasis in the presented material. In addition, the chapters contain an analysis of subject matter from both *major theoretical perspectives* and, where appropriate, *middle-range theories*. Chapters close with conclusions, and end-of-chapter resources include lists of key terms and summaries that address the focal learning questions. The active learning activities and discussion questions in each chapter help create a student-centered class that engages student interest.

The book's rich pedagogy supports active learning and engagement throughout each chapter.

- **Learning Questions** start off every chapter, introducing students to the focus of the chapter and preparing them for the material it covers. These questions are tied to the learning objectives provided in the instructor resources. Each main section of the chapter addresses a learning question.

- **Check Your Understanding** questions appear at the end of every major section in a chapter, providing students with an opportunity to pause in their reading and ensure that they comprehend and retain what they've just read.
- **Doing Sociology** activities appear at the end of every major section of each chapter and relate directly to their respective learning questions. These active learning exercises enable students to apply the sociological concepts, theories, and methods covered in the text. Each chapter contains a variety of exercises so that instructors can use them in class, online, or as assignments conducted outside of class. Reference the *Doing Sociology* activities and the clear instructions on how to carry them out—and on how they relate to the chapter objectives—in the Activity Guide available through the book's instructor resources. You can find even more exercises in the digital resources accompanying the text.
- **Sociologists in Action** boxes feature a student or professional “sociologist in action” doing public sociology related to the material covered in the chapter. This feature provides examples of how sociology can be used to make a positive impact on society.
- **Key Terms** appear in boldface type where they are substantially discussed for the first time and are compiled in a list with page numbers at the end of their respective chapters. The glossary contains corresponding definitions.
- Every chapter concludes with a **Chapter Summary** that restates the learning questions presented at the start of the chapter and provides answers to them. This provides an important way for students to refresh their understanding of the material and retain what they've learned.

In addition, as appropriate, chapters include information on careers that relate to the chapter content. This allows students to recognize, even during their first sociology course, the wide variety of career options a sociology degree provides.

What's New in the Fourth Edition

After using *Sociology in Action* ourselves—and hearing from many instructors who also used it—we worked to make it even more useful for instructors and interesting for students. Key changes and additions we made include the following:

- More *Doing Sociology* exercises that take a short time in class.
- Working to make sure *Doing Sociology* exercises are AI resistant.
- Making sure each chapter contains a *Doing Sociology* exercise that requires students to use a figure or table in the chapter.
- Using an even more applied and student-friendly approach in our writing.
- Including only perspectives and midrange theories that relate directly to the subject matter in each chapter.
- Adding new *Doing Sociology* exercises, *Discussion Questions*, and *Sociologists in Action* features (each including a discussion question).
- Thoroughly updating all chapters without adding to their length, including new or updated coverage of
 - the latest issues facing the LGBTQ community, people of color, immigrants, and refugees;
 - student loan debt;
 - class inequality;

- climate change;
- sexual and gender identities;
- sexual harassment;
- power and who writes history;
- more information on how racism, sexism, classism, and so on affect every member of society;
- the connections among social position, place and health, and life expectancy;
- the relationship between sociological knowledge and democracy;
- the housing crisis;
- men's experiences with family violence;
- how to help children exposed to family instability; and
- technology facilitating family balance and relationships.

Digital Resources

This text includes an array of instructor teaching materials designed to save you time and to help you keep students engaged. To learn more, visit **sagepub.com** or contact your Sage representative at <https://collegepublishing.sagepub.com/find-my-rep>.

List of Learning Activities

Doing Sociology 1.1: How Can Sociology Boost Your Career?

Doing Sociology 1.2: Distinguishing Individual and Social Problems

Doing Sociology 1.3: The Science of Sociology

Doing Sociology 1.4: Stereotypes and Generalizations about College Students

Doing Sociology 1.5: Practicing the Two Core Commitments

Doing Sociology 1.6: How Can Sociology Benefit You and Society?

Doing Sociology 2.1: Manifest and Latent Functions

Doing Sociology 2.2: Using The Conflict Perspective to Understand How Parent's Perceptions Differ by Race

Doing Sociology 2.3: Visualizing the Symbolic Construction of Campus Culture

Doing Sociology 2.4: Comparing Theoretical Frameworks

Doing Sociology 3.1: Reflecting on Sociology in Your Career

Doing Sociology 3.2: Experiencing Sociological Data Collection Methods

Doing Sociology 3.3: Understanding Basic Quantitative Analysis

Doing Sociology 3.4: The Steps in the Scientific Method

Doing Sociology 3.5: Designing Good Samples

Doing Sociology 3.6: Using Research Skills to Evaluate Politicians' Claims

Doing Sociology 4.1: How Does the Social Construction of Time Impact You?

Doing Sociology 4.2: Norms, Statuses, Roles, and Your Morning Routine

Doing Sociology 4.3: What Values Are Universal?

Doing Sociology 4.4: Assessing Your Cultural Capital

Doing Sociology 5.1: Understanding Socialization

Doing Sociology 5.2: Developing a Social Self

Doing Sociology 5.3: Agents of Socialization

Doing Sociology 5.4: Gender Socialization

Doing Sociology 5.5: Status, Social Roles, and Identity

Doing Sociology 5.6: How Does Belonging to an Organization Benefit You?

Doing Sociology 5.7: Social Interaction

Doing Sociology 6.1: Defining Deviance

Doing Sociology 6.2: Considering Structural Predictors of Deviance

Doing Sociology 6.3: Becoming a Moral Entrepreneur for Eating Insects

Doing Sociology 6.4: Identifying Deviance Neutralizations

Doing Sociology 7.1: Income and Wealth

Doing Sociology 7.2: Sociological Perspectives and Income Inequality

Doing Sociology 7.3: Social Stratification

Doing Sociology 7.4: What Social Class Are You?

Doing Sociology 7.5: How Can You Increase Your Chances of Moving Up the Social Class Ladder?

Doing Sociology 7.6: The Impact of Class and You

Doing Sociology 7.7: Policies That Affect Economic Inequality

Doing Sociology 8.1: The Social Construction of Your Race

Doing Sociology 8.2: Prejudice, Individual Discrimination, or Institutional Discrimination?

Doing Sociology 8.3: Why Workers of All Races Should Unite

Doing Sociology 8.4: Now That You Know, What Should You Do?

Doing Sociology 8.5: Understanding Racism in Other Nations

Doing Sociology 8.6: A Refugee Integration Plan for Your Campus

Doing Sociology 9.1: Distinguishing Terms

Doing Sociology 9.2: Which Is Most Helpful?

Doing Sociology 9.3: Media and Gender and Sexual Identities

Doing Sociology 9.4: Fixing Gender Issues in the Workplace

Doing Sociology 9.5: Sexual Activity Rates

Doing Sociology 10.1: Spot the Legitimacy

Doing Sociology 10.2: Writing a Social Contract

Doing Sociology 10.3: Legitimate Domination: 2024 Election Activity

Doing Sociology 10.4: What If? Monarchy and Autocracy

Doing Sociology 10.5: Who Rules America?

Doing Sociology 10.6: Twentieth-Century Patterns of Consumption

Doing Sociology 10.7: Comparing Capitalism and Socialism in TANF

Doing Sociology 10.8: Communism and Fascism

Doing Sociology 11.1: What Is a Family?

Doing Sociology 11.2: Families Changing over Time

Doing Sociology 11.3: Which Theory Is Most Helpful?

Doing Sociology 11.4: Who Does the Caretaking?

Doing Sociology 11.5: Family-Friendly Policies

Doing Sociology 11.6: Comparing Paid Leave in 36 Countries

Doing Sociology 12.1: Describing Education as a Social Institution

Doing Sociology 12.2: How the Intersection of Biography and History Shapes Educational Experiences

Doing Sociology 12.3: Sociological Perspectives on School Challenges

Doing Sociology 12.4: Education and the Reproduction of Inequality

Doing Sociology 12.5: Exploring the Impact of International Experiences on Workforce Readiness

Doing Sociology 12.6: DEBATE: What Education Policies Should We Pursue to Level the Playing Field and Save Democracy?

Doing Sociology 13.1: Understanding the Importance of Sociology in Healthcare

Doing Sociology 13.2: Illness as a Social Experience

Doing Sociology 13.3: “Longer, Darker, Fuller Lashes”

Doing Sociology 13.4: Food Insecurity

Doing Sociology 13.5: DEBATE: Life Expectancy Determinants

Doing Sociology 13.6: Health Care Issues

Doing Sociology 14.1: Understanding Religion, Religiosity, and Spirituality

Doing Sociology 14.2: Debating the Impact of Pluralism and Secularization

Doing Sociology 14.3: Fundamentalism

Doing Sociology 14.4: Current Trends in Religious Affiliation

Doing Sociology 14.5: Mapping the Global Diffusion of Religion

Doing Sociology 14.6: Quick Application of Sociological Theories to Religion

Doing Sociology 14.7: Religion and Social Change

Doing Sociology 15.1: Calculate Your Own Ecological Footprint

Doing Sociology 15.2: Climate Change Campaigner for a Day

Doing Sociology 15.3: Where Does Our Electricity Come From?

Doing Sociology 15.4: Green Advertisement Review

Doing Sociology 15.5: The Unequal Distribution of Climate Change Contribution

Doing Sociology 15.6: Environmental Inequalities and Social Solutions

Doing Sociology 16.1: Planning Direct Action

Doing Sociology 16.2: Organizing During a Time of Crisis

Doing Sociology 16.3: Identifying Types of Social Movements

Doing Sociology 16.4: Symbolism in Social Movements: A Debate

Doing Sociology 16.5: Steps of a Social Movement

Doing Sociology 16.6: Dealing With Backlash

Doing Sociology 16.7: Creating Social Change

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Chapter 1

Training Your Sociological Eye

Kathleen Odell Korgen



iStockPhoto/Dmytro Varavin

Learning Questions

- 1.1 What is sociology?
- 1.2 What do the sociological eye and the sociological imagination allow you to do?
- 1.3 What key aspects of sociology make it a social *science*?
- 1.4 How can you tell the difference between a good generalization and a stereotype?
- 1.5 What did Randall Collins say are the core commitments of sociology?
- 1.6 How can sociology benefit both individuals and society?

Have you ever wanted to know what you can do to improve your chances of landing a desirable job after college? If sexism is still a problem? Why college tuition is so expensive? Why the number of hate groups in the United States has reached a record high? Why more people are refusing to get vaccinated? What types of jobs will be most available when you graduate? How students can effectively protest government policies they oppose? How you can make a positive impact on society? If so, you have chosen the right subject! Sociology can help you answer all these questions—and raise some new ones.

What Is Sociology?

So, what is sociology? **Sociology** is the scientific study of society, including how individuals both *shape* and *are shaped by* society. Notice in this definition that people are active beings, shapers of society, but they are also affected by society. It's important to remember that society influences us in myriad ways—how we think, what we notice, what we believe to be true, how we see ourselves, and so on. But it is simultaneously vital to realize that we help shape the society in which we live. This duality is at the heart of sociology and our daily lives—whether we are aware of it or not.



Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head and, later, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work promoting education for girls. Her life helps us see how we both shape and are shaped by our societies.

Marla Aufmuth

Shaping and Being Shaped by Society

The life of Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize winner in history, provides an excellent example of this duality. No one can deny that Malala is an extraordinary young woman. Her personal bravery and selflessness are awe-inspiring. Just nine months after she was shot in the head by the Taliban for publicly promoting education for girls in Pakistan, Malala declared in an address to the United Nations Youth Assembly that “one child, one teacher, one book, and one pen, can change the world” (United Nations 2013). Her organization, the Malala Fund, has provided the means for many other girls to gain an education. Clearly, Malala has shown the power of an individual to influence society.

Malala, however, just like the rest of us, is a product of her society. Imagine if, instead of growing up in the Swat Valley of Pakistan during the time of the Taliban, she grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey. Her life would have been very different. She would not have been shot by the Taliban, and she would not have created the Malala Fund. Indeed, the Malala raised in New Jersey may not have even been aware that girls in many areas of the world face violence for going to school. Sociology helps us understand the impact of society on us and how we can work with others, as Malala is doing now, to solve the social issues facing our societies.

The Origins and Current Uses of Sociology

Sociology developed out of the need to understand and address social issues. The roots of sociology are based in efforts to understand and to help control the impact of major societal changes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in Europe and the United States, organized people challenged monarchies and the dominance of religion. The Industrial Revolution dramatically changed where people lived and how they worked. Social change occurred everywhere, and philosophers and scientists offered new answers to life's questions. Many began to believe science could help leaders understand and shape society. Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the French philosopher who gave sociology its name, envisioned that sociology would be the “queen science” that could help steer society safely through great changes.

Today, sociologists help us understand and address challenges like economic inequality, environmental racism, sexism, the social dimensions of global climate change, war, terrorism, and so on. Sociologists work in a variety of settings, including colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations (e.g., environmental groups, public health programs, and community-based organizations),

government, marketing, sales, social services, and the human resources departments of businesses and nonprofit organizations. People in every profession benefit from sociological training, and employers value employees with sociological skills.

A survey by LinkedIn (2024) reveals that students who study sociology tend to gain precisely the skills employers seek.

1. Communication
2. Customer service
3. Leadership
4. Project management
5. Management
6. Analytics
7. Teamwork
8. Sales
9. Problem-solving
10. Research

In this course alone, you will have the opportunity to learn *and use* many of these skills. In most sociology undergraduate programs, you can gain and use all of them!

How I Got Active in Sociology

Kathleen Odell Korgen

I slept most of the way through the SOC 101 course I took in college. The professor lectured, and we took notes (or not).

That SOC 101 course was the last sociology class I took until I found a sociology graduate program in social justice and social economy that encouraged sociologists to put sociological tools into action. In that program, I learned that sociology could show me how I can change society. As a researcher, I have worked on issues related to race relations and racial identity, evaluated social justice efforts and sociology programs, and helped create introductory textbooks that get students to *do* sociology as they learn it.

As a sociology teacher, I want students to know—right away—all that sociology offers them—and society. A major part of my work has been to help students use sociological tools to make a positive impact on society. In my classes, from SOC 101 to Public Sociology and Civic Engagement, students don't just learn about sociology—they become sociologists in action.

Consider This 1.1

Why did sociology develop—and what are some reasons we need similar guidance from sociology today?

Doing Sociology 1.1

How Can Sociology Boost Your Career?

What is sociology?

In this activity, you will consider the ways sociology can be a benefit in any workplace.

No matter what your major or what you intend to do after graduation, sociology can help you. Sociology is useful in any organization and any professional field. Gaining a sociological perspective will enable you to better understand how society, organizations, and groups work; interact effectively with people of different genders, sexual orientations, ages, races, cultures, and economic classes; anticipate the responses of various demographic groups to products and ideas; make and use connections with other people and organizations; and recognize and address issues of inequality and privilege.

Write your answers to the following questions:

1. What is sociology?
2. What career do you plan on pursuing? If you are not sure yet, think of any profession with which you are familiar.
3. Which of the top skills listed as desirable by employers might you use?
4. How can gaining a sociological perspective help you to succeed in that career?

Check Your Understanding

1. What is sociology?
2. What is the duality at the heart of sociology?
3. In what types of settings do sociologists work?

Changing How You View the World

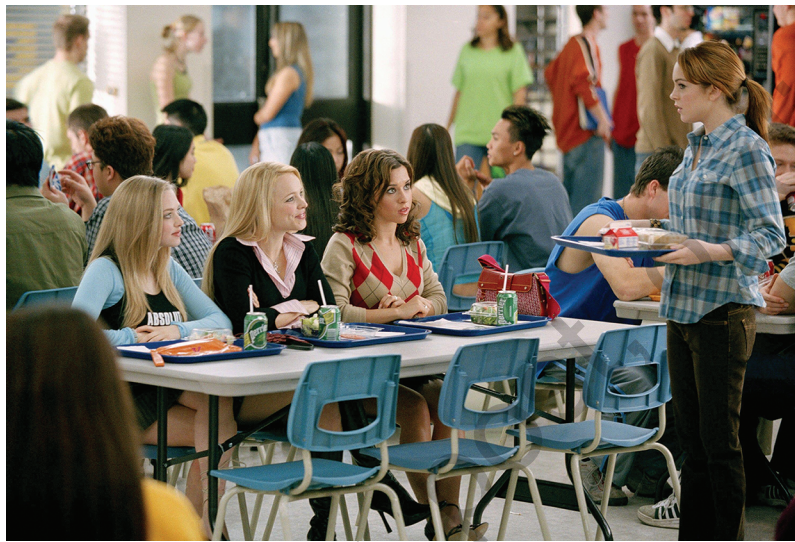
This sociology course will help you develop your sociological eye and your sociological imagination. Together, they allow you to notice and make sense of social patterns in ways that enable you to understand how society works—and to help influence it. **Social patterns** are the behaviors, actions, or arrangements within a group or society that are common and recurring. These range from the usual ways that people act or interact with each other, like which groups of high school kids sit together in the cafeteria, how we say hello, how we celebrate holidays, or how do our jobs at school or work to the structure of our social institutions (e.g., the economy, government, education system). Social patterns help everyone know what to expect from each other, making daily life more predictable and organized. They can also reflect inequality (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, class) in a society. By looking at these patterns, sociologists can understand how groups and societies function and how they change over time.

Society makes its own rules, traditions, beliefs, and even physical items, which together form what we call **culture**. This culture influences how we think, live, believe, and create, and we pick it up from interacting with others. A **social structure** is like the skeleton of society and consists of the social institutions of society like government, schools, the economy, families, and religion. It also includes where people fit in these institutions, like their status (who they are in society) and roles (what society expects them to do). This structure helps people get along and do things together, but it also sets some limits on what we can do. For example, think of being a student in a class (a status). There are certain things expected of you (a role), and this setup not only puts some limits on what you can do but also

makes it easier to learn. Now, imagine what it would be like if your class had no order or rules at all. Would you be able to learn much? Probably not, right?

The Sociological Eye

A **sociological eye** enables you to see what others may not notice. It allows you to peer beneath the surface of a situation and discern cultural and structural social patterns (Collins 1998). For example, there is a woman academic who conducts evaluations of various academic departments every year. Often, she does so as part of a team. She has noticed that whenever she is paired with a man, the clients always look at the man when speaking to them both. As a sociologist, she knows that what she is experiencing is gender bias created and supported by cultural and structural patterns. In general, both men and women tend to defer to men and pay more attention to them, particularly in business settings. This is a cultural pattern that keeps women, in general, at a lower status level than men.



You can use your sociological eye to notice racial, gender, and social status patterns in the cafeteria scenes in the classic film *Mean Girls*—and in most real-life cafeterias.

A. F. Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

Once you start paying attention to gender patterns (e.g., who talks more in classes or meetings, who interrupts whom) or racial patterns (e.g., who eats lunch with whom in the cafeteria, what student organizations tend to attract specific racial groups, who is more likely to be stopped by the police), you won't be able to stop noticing them. Recognizing these patterns makes you more aware of how your campus and the larger society work. Once you have this awareness, you can then take steps to change these patterns—if you so choose. The woman we referred to earlier, for example, now often prepares herself to talk more (and more authoritatively) when paired with a man and teaches others to make an effort to pay as much attention to women as to men. You will learn more about *why* we tend to pay more attention to men in Chapter 8!

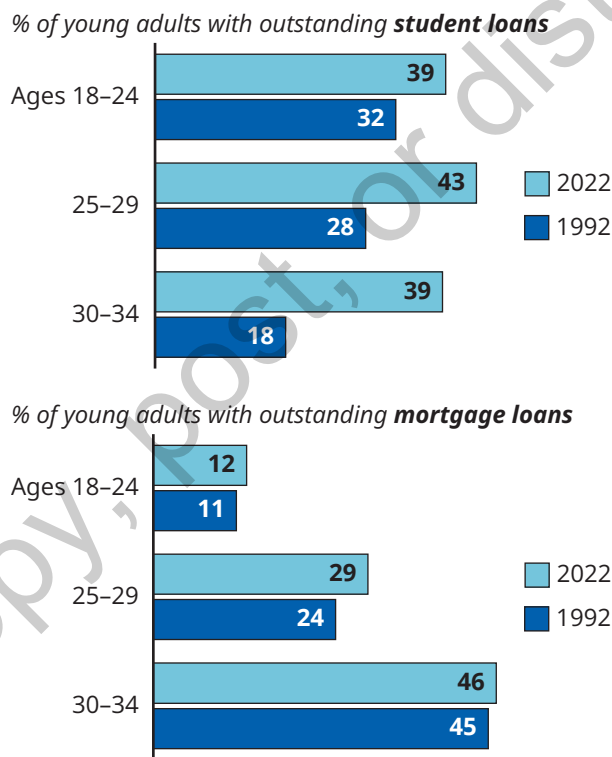
The Sociological Imagination

Once you develop your sociological eye, you can also expand your **sociological imagination**, the ability to connect what is happening in your own life and in the lives of other individuals to social patterns in the larger society. In doing so, you can differentiate between a personal problem and a social problem that requires a societal solution. For example, you may be having a difficult time paying for college. This is a challenge for many individuals. You may address it by taking out loans (and more loans), working while going to school, transferring to a more affordable school, getting a job (or second job) and so forth.

So far, these are all individual responses to the problem of high tuition. Looking at the problem with a sociological eye, however, can help you see that this is not just a hardship for a few individuals but part of a social pattern. Many college students across the United States face the same issue, and to address it effectively, we need to make changes on the societal (structural), rather than just the individual, level.

As Figure 1.1 shows, the percentage of Americans with student loan debt has increased substantially since the 1990s. Today, approximately one in four young Americans ages 18 to 29 have student loan debt. How much people owe in student loans has also increased. When adjusted for inflation, the average young adult with student debt owed between \$6,000 and \$7,000 in 1992. Thirty years later, in 2022, the average student debt holder owed three to four times that amount (\$16,000 for those 25 to 29 and \$20,000 among those 30 to 34) (Pew Research Center, 2024). People with tens of thousands of dollars in student loans (or even more!) have great difficulty buying a car, purchasing a house, or maybe even paying rent. This, in turn, hurts the overall economy.

Figure 1.1 ■ Young Adults More Likely Than Those of 30 Years Ago to Have Student Debt



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the 1992 and 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances. "Parents, Young Adult Children and the Transition to Adulthood." <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/01/25/key-milestones-for-young-adults-today-versus-30-years-ago/#:~:text=Among%20those%20ages%20to%2029%2C%20the%20share%20with%20student,24%20is%20not%20statistically%20significant>.

Once you begin to look at the high cost of college as a societal issue, you can investigate its causes. You can then work with other students and families across the nation to press elected officials to develop state and national solutions to this societal problem.

C. Wright Mills (1959:1) developed the concept of the sociological imagination to describe how our individual lives relate to social forces. The sociological imagination gives us the ability to recognize the relationship between our own biographies and the society in which we live. Mills explained the impact of society on individuals this way:

When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. . . . When wars happen, an insurance salesperson becomes a rocket

launcher; a store clerk, a radar operator; a wife or husband lives alone; a child grows up without a parent. . . . Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Our lives are shaped by the societies in which we live. Yet we can also help shape those societies. In the past few presidential elections, results have come down to the decisions of just a few thousand voters in a handful (or less) of states. On a more personal level, your experience in this class depends a lot on how your professor chooses to teach it. Your behavior will also influence it. Imagine how different this class will be for everyone if you choose to prepare for each class and actively participate or if you choose to blow off the reading and groan every time one of your classmates says anything. Individuals choose how to behave within their social environments—and those choices affect the environments.

The Fallacy of the Individualist Perspective

We often forget, however, that our choices are limited. In the United States today, the myth that we, as individuals, determine our own lives permeates society. From this *individualist perspective*, whether we succeed or fail depends primarily on our own efforts. For example, you have probably heard of the saying that in the United States, anyone who works hard enough can “make it.” A sociological eye quickly sees that this individualist perspective is flawed. Some people have fewer hurdles and more opportunities in life than others. For example, take two students with the same level of innate intelligence. Both work hard, but one goes to a school that offers many AP courses, where students are expected and encouraged to apply to selective colleges. The other student goes to a school with few AP courses, where teachers and administrators focus on preventing kids from dropping out of high school rather than on getting them into selective colleges. Chances are the second student may not even be aware of all the schools to which the first student applies. The two students’ chances of “making it” are not the same—no matter how hard they both work.

The sociological eye and the sociological imagination give us the ability to notice patterns and to recognize the impact society has on us and how the individualist perspective works to prevent people from noticing that impact. In doing so, it gives us advantages over those who cannot yet see social patterns and recognize societal forces. Those blind to the influence of society are unknowingly shaped by it. Those with a sociological eye and a sociological imagination recognize the impact society has on them *and* how they can work most effectively to shape society.

Consider This 1.2

How do both the sociological imagination and the sociological eye help you recognize the fallacy of the individualistic perspective?

Doing Sociology 1.2

Distinguishing Individual and Social Problems

What do the sociological eye and the sociological imagination allow you to do?

In this exercise, you will use your sociological eye and sociological imagination to note and determine how to address a social problem.

Think of a social problem common among college students today (e.g., student debt, competing demands of school/work/family, lack of adequate academic preparation for college). Then, answer the following questions:

1. What is the social problem?
2. How do you know this is a social problem, rather than an individual problem?
3. How does your sociological eye and sociological imagination help you identify social problems and potential solutions to these problems?
4. Share your answer with a classmate and, together, choose one of your social problems and explain (1) why and (2) how it should be addressed on a societal, rather than an individual, level.

Be prepared to share your work with your class.

Check Your Understanding

1. What does a sociological eye allow you to do?
2. What makes up the culture and social structure of a society?
3. What can you do with a sociological imagination?

Sociology as a Social Science

Sociology is a social science, a scientific discipline that studies how society works. Other social sciences include human geography, anthropology, political science, and psychology. As we seek to better understand how society operates, sociologists, like all scientists, use theories and the scientific research process to formulate research questions and collect and analyze data.

Scientific Research

All scientific research involves the pursuit of knowledge through systematic data collection (e.g., experiments, observation), data measurement (describing the data we collect in terms of numbers, words, pictures, or stories), and analysis (explaining what the data indicate). Such research often starts with the desire to understand why a phenomenon occurs (e.g., Why does the sun rise and set? Why do wealthier people tend to live longer?). We often start with an educated guess (hypothesis), and then we collect, measure, and analyze data to test the hypothesis. When scientists present their research to their peers and the public, they provide a careful description of how they derived their findings. This transparency allows other scientists to replicate their research and point out flaws in the original research or confirm its findings. As we make sense of the data we and others gather and analyze, we create, refine, or refute theoretical perspectives and theories (which then lead us to other hypotheses to test). As our findings change, so must the theories we use to understand them.

Theoretical Perspectives and Theories

Both theoretical perspectives and theories are explanations, carefully derived from the scientific method of research to explain the natural or social world. Theoretical perspectives are paradigms, or ways of viewing the world. They help us make sense of the social patterns we observe, and they determine the questions we ask. In turn, our research findings allow us to test theoretical perspectives and theories and change them as needed. As our findings change, so must the theories we use to understand them.

Each sociological perspective has its own focus and asks different questions about the social world. Some ask questions about social order and cohesion (e.g., How do the various parts of society work together?), some ask questions about problems in society (e.g., Why is there inequality?), and some ask questions about the ways we see ourselves in relation to others (e.g., How do our interactions with others influence how we see ourselves?).

Under the umbrella of each sociological perspective fall individual theories that explain particular aspects of society and social behavior (e.g., How does family income affect education? Why are there more female teachers but more male principals? How have smart phones affected people's social intelligence?). You will learn more about the most important theoretical perspectives sociologists use in Chapter 2 and about topic-specific (middle-range) theories that fall under their respective umbrellas throughout the book.

The Sociological Scientific Research Process

Sociology is a science because we base our understandings of how society operates in data, analysis, and theories grounded in the scientific research process. Like other scientists, sociologists conduct research in systematic ways that we clearly describe and offer for critique from other social scientists and the general public. Others can replicate our research and support our conclusions or reveal flaws in our data-gathering process and findings. Sometimes people from different demographic groups notice different patterns in the same data. For example, sociologists interested in the lives of college students may focus on different aspects of college life, depending on their gender, race, sexual orientation, or economic and educational backgrounds. Studying the same phenomena from as many different angles as possible allows us to gain a more accurate and scientifically sound understanding of our society.

Sometimes, our findings are unexpected. For example, a sociologist who uses a theoretical lens that focuses on inequality and group conflict may be surprised to learn that a corporation she is studying has a high level of camaraderie and evidence of strong teamwork among workers at all status levels. If our findings consistently diverge from our theoretical explanations, we need to adjust our theories accordingly. Sociologists are in the business of creating useful theories based on good generalizations.

Consider This 1.3

What must sociologists do when their research reveals unwelcome findings? How does this show that sociology is a social *science*?

Doing Sociology 1.3

The Science of Sociology

What key aspects of sociology make it a social science?

In this activity, you will put your knowledge of what makes sociology a science to work. Based on what you just read in this section, answer the following questions.

1. Pick a contemporary societal issue and explain why it is essential for multiple sociologists to study this topic from different angles. Discuss the value of diverse perspectives in understanding complex social phenomena.
2. Describe a recent significant social change or event. How might it prompt sociologists to reconsider or modify existing theories about social behavior or structure?

Instructor's Note

This activity is designed to deepen students' understanding of sociology as a science by applying theoretical knowledge to potential scenarios. To conduct this activity in in-person classes, facilitate a structured discussion where students share their responses to each question in small groups. Encourage debate and reflection on different viewpoints. This approach allows students to articulate their thoughts clearly and learn from their peers. For online courses, have students post their answers to a designated discussion board or forum. Assign students to respond to at least two of their peers' postings with constructive feedback or further questions.

Check Your Understanding

1. What makes sociology a social science?
2. How do sociologists use theoretical perspectives and theories?
3. Why do sociologists collect data in open, systematic ways?

Differentiating between Good Generalizations and Stereotypes

Has anyone said to you that “you shouldn’t generalize”? That was probably right after you made some disparaging remark about all the people from a particular town, all the movies starring a particular actor, or all roads in New Jersey. What you were doing (and they were right that you shouldn’t) was stereotyping or making a *bad* generalization. Sociologists generalize all the time as they recognize and point out social patterns in society. However, we aim to make good generalizations and avoid stereotyping. **Good generalizations** are statements, backed by evidence, used to describe groups of people or things in overall terms, with the understanding that there can always be exceptions.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are predetermined ideas about particular groups of people (e.g., all Irish are drunks, all Asians are good at math) based on hearsay or personal experience and held regardless of contrary evidence. Often used to promote or excuse discriminatory treatment, stereotypes can spark irrational fear or favor. Some may be closer to the truth than others, but none are based on solid evidence. Stereotypes are bad generalizations.

Movies and television shows can both promote and challenge stereotypes. For example, in one scene in the film *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, the White, male boss hands Harold, a Korean American, a bunch of his work—so he can start his weekend early. The boss holds a stereotype of Asian Americans that makes him think Harold (and all other Asian Americans) “live for” crunching numbers. Of course, however, movie viewers know that work is the last thing Harold wants to do that weekend.

Fortunately, in recent years, some television shows have included Asian characters who are not nerdy, glasses-wearing, numbers-crunching loving sidekicks. In fact, some are not even that bright! Remember Jason Mendoza from *The Good Place* or Josh Chan in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*? These characters help viewers see Asian Americans in a light that challenges traditional stereotypes.

Good Generalizations

Good generalizations, unlike stereotypes, are based on social scientific research. For example, one common stereotype is that women are “chatty Cathys” and talk incessantly. A good generalization, on the contrary, is that in mixed-sex conversations, men tend to talk and interrupt more than women.



Does this guy look like someone who just wants to crunch numbers all weekend? The movie *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* put a spotlight on some racial stereotypes about Asian Americans.

AF Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

Women ask more questions than men and tend to work harder at fostering conversation, but it is usually men who dominate verbal interactions (Wolfe, as quoted in Maderer 2020).

Did you notice how the generalizations in the paragraph above are phrased? Unlike the stereotype about “chatty Cathys,” they describe what social scientists have found about speaking patterns without denigrating one sex or the other. Good generalizations are used to describe rather than judge groups of people.

Good generalizations must change when new data counter them. For example, the generalization that “most people in the United States oppose same-sex marriage” was once true but no longer qualifies as a good generalization. As our generalizations change with new data, so do our research questions. For example, we may now want to ask, what led to the change in attitudes toward same-sex marriage? And will this acceptance of same-sex marriage also lead to national legislation to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people from discrimination?

Consider This 1.4

Why do sociologists say it is OK to generalize, as long as you aren't stereotyping?

Doing Sociology 1.4

Stereotypes and Generalizations about College Students

How can you tell the difference between a good generalization and a stereotype?

In this exercise, you will examine the differences between stereotypes and good generalizations. You may be asked to share your responses with the rest of the class.

1. Explain the difference between a stereotype and a good generalization.

2. List three stereotypes you have heard describing the characteristics of students at your own school.
3. What could you do to determine if these stereotypes are generalizations or stereotypes? What steps would you take?
4. Could you make good generalizations about all college students based on good generalizations about students at your school? Why or why not?

Check Your Understanding

1. On what are stereotypes based?
2. How do sociologists create good generalizations?
3. How does new information affect (a) stereotypes and (b) good generalizations?
4. For what purpose do sociologists use generalizations?

The Obligations of Sociology

The earliest sociologists used sociology to find ways to understand and improve society. In 1896, Albion Small, the founder of the first accredited department of sociology in the United States (at the University of Chicago), implored his fellow sociologists to do so with these words:

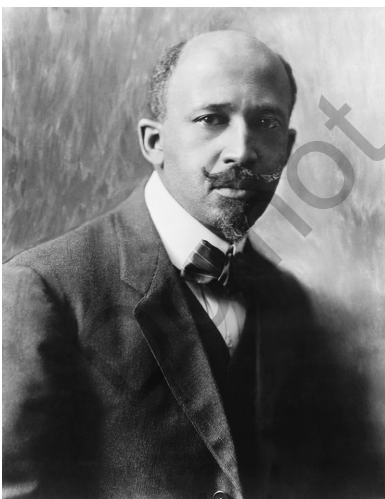
I would have American scholars, especially in the social sciences, declare their independence of do-nothing traditions. I would have them repeal the law of custom which bars marriage of thought with action. I would have them become more profoundly and sympathetically scholarly by enriching the wisdom which comes from knowing with the larger wisdom which comes from doing. . . . May American scholarship never so narrow itself to the interests of scholars that it shall forfeit its primacy among the interests of men! (Small 1896:564, 583)

W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the key founders of sociology, whom many White sociologists of his era ignored because of their racism, needed no prodding. An African American, Harvard-trained scholar, Du Bois faced rejection when applying for tenured faculty positions at historically White colleges and universities because of his race. Undaunted, he spent his career leading research studies at Atlanta University, writing prolifically, and organizing civil rights efforts.

Throughout his long career, Du Bois carried out a combination of research and activism, achieving groundbreaking work in both areas. In the late nineteenth century, Du Bois conducted the first large-scale, empirical sociological research in the United States, with the clear goal of refuting racist ideas about African Americans (Morris 2015). Later, he helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and tirelessly promoted civil rights for African Americans.

Jane Addams, the cofounder of the settlement house movement in the United States and another of the key early sociologists, worked with—and helped inspire—Du Bois. Just as Du Bois faced racism, however, Addams had to deal with sexism. Although Addams and her colleagues carried out numerous community research projects while living and working with low-income people in poor, urban neighborhoods, they also faced discrimination and did not receive the recognition they deserved.

The research Addams and her colleagues conducted helped guide that of Du Bois and many of the male faculty at the University of Chicago in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Deegan 1988). It also helped create such social goods as child labor laws, a juvenile court



W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the founders of sociology, used sociological tools to show how society works and to fight racism.

Underwood Archives/Archive Photos/Getty Images

system, safer conditions for workers, and mandatory schooling for children. Addams cofounded both the NAACP (along with Du Bois, among others) and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The Two Core Commitments

In the spirit of Addams, Du Bois, and Small, Randall Collins (1998) has described two **core commitments** of sociology. He says that the first core commitment of sociology is to *use the sociological eye* to observe social patterns. The second requires noticing patterns of injustice and *taking action* to challenge those patterns. Collins and the sociologists who have authored this book believe that sociology should be used to make a positive impact on society. If you have developed a sociological eye, you are obligated to use it for the good of society. For example, if we perceive that in more than half of the states in the United States, it is still legal to fire people on the basis of their sexual orientation (in nonreligious institutions as well as in religious organizations), we should work to address that injustice.



Jane Addams

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Consider This 1.5

Can you see yourself fulfilling the two core commitments of sociology in response to a particular issue? If yes, both or only one? Why? If not, why not? Do you think most of your peers would be able and willing to do so? Why?

Doing Sociology 1.5

Practicing the Two Core Commitments

What did Randall Collins say are the core commitments of sociology?

In this exercise, you will practice fulfilling what Collins called the two core commitments of sociology.

Think about the social patterns at your school. Then write answers to the following questions:

1. What patterns appear unjust to you? (e.g., Are all campus workers paid a living wage? Do students from all social classes, genders, and sexual orientations feel safe and valued on your campus? Are there enough mental health services for students? Are classrooms, restrooms, and dorms accessible for everyone?)
2. If you obtained data that reveal a pattern of injustice, what would you do with it? What would you need to know about how the school operates to effectively address the injustice? (e.g., Who controls the curriculum? Who provides funding? Who decides where the money goes? Who determines punishments for violations of the student code of conduct?)
3. How does understanding how society (or your school) works help you to influence it?

Check Your Understanding

1. For what purpose did the earliest sociologists use sociology?
2. Why did W. E. B. Du Bois conduct large-scale empirical research in the United States?

3. What were some of the ways Jane Addams used sociological research to help create social goods?
4. What are the two core commitments of sociology?

The Benefits of Sociology

Developing a sociological eye and gaining a sociological perspective will benefit both you and society. You will notice social patterns that many others cannot see. Even if these patterns are unpleasant (sexism, racism, ableism, etc.), noticing and understanding them will help you develop ways of dealing with them in your own life. Forewarned is forearmed. You can also see patterns that you can proactively use to your advantage (e.g., what careers will be most in demand soon, how to gain social capital useful in the job market). Through gaining a sociological perspective, you will learn how to act more effectively in groups and with members of different cultures. You will also gain the ability to collect, analyze, and explain information and to influence your society.

The last points concerning what you, personally, will gain from a sociological perspective relate to how sociology can help you contribute to society. Just knowing how society operates and how individuals are both shaped by and shapers of society can make you a more effective member of your community. You can learn how to work with others to improve your campus, workplace, neighborhood, and society.

Sociology and Democracy

In democratic societies, it is particularly important for citizens to understand how society works and to develop the ability to notice social patterns. It is also vital that they be able to understand the difference between good information and fake news. As Figure 1.2 shows, Americans from both sides of the political divide say political debate has become less fact-based. Can you tell what news to trust? Checking to see if the data described in a news source were gained through the scientific research process and knowing how to tell the difference between good generalizations and stereotypes will help you discern real news from fake news.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, false news stories, like one falsely claiming that a large number of fake votes for Clinton were discovered in Ohio, became rampant. This particular story was shared more than 6 million times on social media. A recent college graduate, Cameron Harris, created this story on his fake news site, using a photo of ballot boxes in a warehouse to lend credibility. Despite the warehouse being in England, not Ohio, the deception wasn't immediately obvious to many.

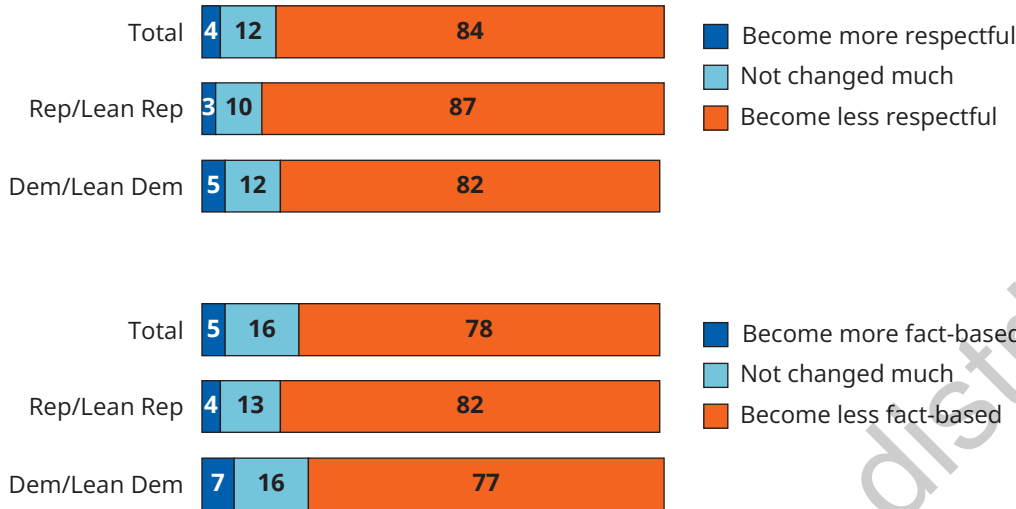
It's hard to know how much the fake news story Harris created influenced the election, but it was far from the only fake news story sweeping across social media before Americans went to vote in 2016. For example, "Pizzagate" was a baseless conspiracy theory that falsely claimed a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., was the center of a child trafficking ring led by high-profile Democrats. This completely unfounded story led to a dangerous incident where a man, believing the conspiracy, fired a rifle inside the restaurant as he was "investigating" the claims.

Fast forward to the 2020 election, supporters of these conspiracy theories, such as those following QAnon, visibly backed Trump. QAnon, a group that thrives on conspiracy theories, including claims about vaccines and election fraud, took an active role in the political campaign. Its followers, seeing Trump as a savior, flocked to his rallies and occasionally appeared armed at places they believed were central to anti-Trump conspiracies.

The impact of these conspiracy theories extends beyond political rallies. In 2022, a man influenced by QAnon conspiracy theories attacked the 82-year-old husband of the Democratic Speaker of the House, demonstrating the dangerous transition from online rhetoric to physical violence. Furthermore,

Figure 1.2 ▪ Overwhelming Majorities Say Political Debate in the United States Has Become Less Respectful, Fact-Based in Past Few Years

% who say that over the last several years the tone and nature of political debate in this country has ...



Source: Pew Research Center, 2023, Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 10–16, 2023, “Americans’ Dismal Views of the Nation’s Politics.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-feelings-about-politics-polarization-and-the-tone-of-political-discourse/>.

the division sown by these theories has strained personal relationships, with a support group for those affected by loved ones’ belief in QAnon growing to over 274,000 members by February 2024.

The storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, underscores the dire consequences of misinformation. Believers in the falsehood that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump participated in the insurrection, showcasing the tragic culmination of years of unchecked fake news and conspiracy theories. Misinformation about vaccines can lead to deadly outbreaks of preventable diseases. In Texas, a significant measles outbreak began in January 2025. By just four months later, it has resulted in 718 confirmed cases, 93 hospitalizations, and two deaths among unvaccinated children. The outbreak has primarily affected communities with low vaccination rates, such as the Mennonite population in Gaines County, which accounts for over half of the state’s cases. Health officials report that 96 percent of those infected either were unvaccinated or had unknown vaccination status. This resurgence of measles, a disease medical officials declared eliminated in the United States in 2000, provides a vivid example of the dangers of vaccine misinformation and highlights the critical importance of maintaining high vaccination rates to protect public health.

Now, as we navigate an era of deep fakes and increasingly sophisticated misinformation campaigns, the need for a sociologically informed public is more critical than ever. Understanding the social dynamics that allow misinformation to flourish is key to fostering a resilient and informed society capable of confronting these challenges.

Sociology and Careers

Finally, as noted earlier, sociological knowledge is useful in any career you can imagine—including teaching, business management, politics, human resources, medical administration, social work, nonprofit management, and marketing. For example, to be effective, social workers need to understand the populations they serve and the structural and cultural forces affecting them. A marketer must have the research skills to learn what appeals to different groups and how to advertise to each most persuasively. Managers need cultural competency and emotional intelligence to create a motivated and engaged workforce. From knowing what job to apply for, what degree

you need to gain it, and how to conduct yourself in the workplace, sociological skills can help you succeed in your career. In each of the chapters that follow, take note of the sociological skills you gain and in what professions you might use them. The sociologist in action featured in this chapter, Megan Demit, describes some of the ways she uses her undergraduate sociology training in her life after college.

Sociologists in Action

Using Sociological Skills to Help My Community Make Technology More Accessible

Megan Demit

As an undergraduate sociology major, I learned about structural inequities and developed a passion to help empower historically excluded communities. When COVID-19 hit and particularly threatened already vulnerable groups, my sociology training kicked in and pushed me to act. That's how I came to co-found SF Community Support.

San Francisco, where I live, was the first city in the United States to implement a stay-at-home order at the beginning of the pandemic. We were all uncertain about what the future would hold, but one thing I kept thinking about was how my elderly and immunocompromised neighbors would cope under these new restrictions. How would they get their families fed if they couldn't go outside, for fear of putting themselves at risk of contracting COVID? I started connecting with neighbors online, and a small group of us ended up cofounding SF Community Support—a mutual aid network. Since then, we've been matching volunteers with at-risk individuals to assist them with grocery shopping, running errands, and emotional support during the pandemic.

Because this effort was fully remote, I learned how technology plays an important role in democratizing information and providing opportunity—and, conversely, how “technology” as we know it might also be alienating or inaccessible to some. We created a website where those seeking assistance could submit requests online. Knowing that this method wouldn't work for everyone, however, we also gave out a phone number, posted fliers around neighborhoods, and introduced ourselves to members of the community. Studying sociology ingrained in me the notion that it's important to meet people where they are at and to notice the structural obstacles that may prevent them from accessing services.

As a master's student in User Experience Design now, I am learning how we can harness technology to make our lives easier. Thanks to my background in sociology, I always keep people unfamiliar with technological tools in mind as I design user experiences. I am focused on using the design skills I gain to make technological tools accessible to these traditionally marginalized groups of people—so they, too, can use them to improve their lives.

Discussion Question: How has Megan fulfilled the two obligations of sociology?

Megan Demit graduated from the College of the Holy Cross with a degree in sociology and a minor in studio art. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in UX Design at the Maryland Institute College of Art while working at Save the Redwoods League in San Francisco, CA.

Consider This 1.6

Give an example of how you can use sociology to understand how society works and help shape society. How can this skill benefit both you and the larger society?

Doing Sociology 1.6

How Can Sociology Benefit You and Society?

How can sociology benefit both individuals and society?

In this exercise, you will brainstorm all the ways society can benefit both you, as an individual, and the whole society.

Using the information in this chapter, write two lists: (1) the ways sociology can benefit individuals and (2) the way sociology can benefit society. Then, answer the following questions:

1. How does the second list affect individuals?
2. How does the first list influence society?
3. What does this tell us about the relationship between individuals and society?

Check Your Understanding

1. How can sociology benefit individuals?
2. How can sociology benefit society, particularly democratic societies?
3. How might you use sociology in your career?

Conclusion

In this introductory chapter, you learned that sociology, the scientific study of society, provides myriad benefits to both individuals and society. We now turn to how sociologists make sense of how society operates by looking at the different major sociological perspectives. As you will see, each perspective views the world in distinct ways. As you read the chapter, think about which perspective(s) make the most sense to you.

Review

1.1 What is sociology?

Sociology is the scientific study of society, including how individuals both *shape* and *are shaped* by society.

1.2 What do the sociological eye and the sociological imagination allow you to do?

A sociological eye enables you to see what others may not notice. It allows you to peer beneath the surface of a situation and discern social patterns. The sociological imagination gives you the ability to connect what is happening in your own life and in the lives of others to social patterns in the larger society.

1.3 What key aspects of sociology make it a social science?

Sociologists use theories and the scientific research process to formulate research questions and collect and analyze data to better understand how society operates.

1.4 How can you tell the difference between a good generalization and a stereotype?

Good generalizations, unlike stereotypes, are based on social scientific research, used to describe rather than judge groups, and change or are discarded with new information.

1.5 What did Randall Collins say are the core commitments of sociology?

The first of the two core commitments is to use the sociological eye to observe social patterns. The second commitment requires us to notice patterns of injustice and take action to challenge those patterns. Sociology should be used to make a positive impact on society.

1.6 How can sociology benefit both individuals and society?

Through gaining a sociological perspective, you will learn to notice and deal with patterns others do not recognize; act more effectively in groups and with members of different cultures; collect, analyze, and explain information; and influence your society. Sociological knowledge is useful in any career you can imagine.

In democratic societies, it is particularly important for citizens to develop the ability to notice social patterns and how to tell the difference between good generalizations and stereotypes, as well as between trustworthy and “fake” news.

Key Terms

core commitments

culture

good generalizations

social patterns

social structure

sociological eye

sociological imagination

sociology

stereotypes

Chapter 2

Understanding Theory

Kathleen S. Lowney and Kathleen Korgen



iStockPhoto/MarioGuti

Learning Questions

- 2.1 What is structural functionalism?
- 2.2 What is a conflict perspective?
- 2.3 What is symbolic interaction?
- 2.4 How do structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interaction work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?

Children often will try on another person's glasses. Sometimes they will see worse—things look out of focus and fuzzy—but other times, they will see better. Imagining theory as a pair of glasses we put on to look at the social world can be a helpful metaphor. A theory can help us see some aspects of society more clearly while obscuring others. Sociologists develop and use **theories**, explanations for various social patterns within society. Groups of theories that share much in common are what sociologists call **theoretical perspectives**. This chapter focuses on the three main theoretical perspectives in sociology—

structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction—and how each of them “sees” or explains the social world.

Understanding the Structural Functionalist Perspective

The view of modern societies as consisting of interdependent parts working together for the good of the whole is known as **structural functionalism**. Individuals work for the larger society’s interests, rather than their own, because of social solidarity, the unwritten rules and values that govern societies and unite their members. Families, religion, education, and other institutions teach individuals to help society function smoothly.

Durkheim and Types of Societies

Émile Durkheim, writing in the early 1900s, examined social solidarity throughout history. In smaller, preindustrial societies, social solidarity derived from the similarity of its members, what Durkheim referred to as mechanical solidarity. Most did similar types of labor (working the land) and had similar beliefs (based on religion).

As societies evolved, science gained predominance over religion, and jobs became differentiated during the industrial era; a different type of solidarity, an organic solidarity, formed. These societies operated more like a living organism, with various parts, each specializing in only certain tasks but dependent on the others for survival (e.g., in the human body, the heart, and the liver perform different functions, but if one does not do its job, the other will not survive). Durkheim argued that for a society based on organic solidarity to be “healthy” (i.e., in social harmony and in order), all the “parts” of the society had to be working well together, in an interconnected way, just as in a human body. Thus, sociologists who use this theoretical perspective tend to focus on social harmony and social order. They often overlook issues such as conflict and inequality. Instead, structural functionalists emphasize the role of the major social institutions and how they help provide stability to society.

Social Institutions

What are **social institutions**? They are sets of statuses and roles focused around one central aspect of society (think of social institutions as similar to the different organ systems in a human body). A status is the position a person occupies in a particular institution. For example, you occupy the status position of college student. But you may also be a wife, husband, daughter, son, partner, volunteer at a soup kitchen, resident assistant, starting guard on a basketball team, or a member of many other groups. So, you have multiple status positions. A role is composed of the many behaviors that go into occupying a status. So, part of your role as a college student is to come to class on time and prepared. If sociologists were to examine the educational institution as a whole, they would have a macro-level focus. If, however, they were to look at how you and your friends fill the role of college students, they would be working at the **micro level of analysis**. Analyses at the micro level focus on the interactions of individuals and smaller groups of people—like your sociology class or your school’s football team.

How I Got Active in Sociology

Kathleen S. Lowney

I went to college knowing that I wanted to study religion. But then I took Introduction to Sociology—799 other students and me (yes, the course had 800 students!)—and I was hooked. Learning about structure, agency, and sociological theories gave me a language and intellectual

framework to see the social world that I still use today. So on the third day of that first quarter of college, I added sociology as another major. The questions that consume me still focus on the intersection of religion and sociology, be they about the new religion I studied for my doctoral dissertation or for the past 19 years when I have studied adolescent Satanism. I welcome each of you to the study of the academic discipline that I love.

The statuses individuals occupy and the roles they play come together to form the unique social structure of a group, an organization, an institution, or a society. Once a group becomes large enough, social institutions form around accomplishing the tasks central to the survival of the group. Thus, while social institutions are made up of individuals fulfilling their roles, they are much more than these individuals—they are societal in nature. When sociologists examine large-scale social structures, like institutions, they use a **macro level of analysis**.

Structural functionalists note that there are seven primary social institutions: family, religion, economy, education, government, health care, and media. These seven institutions cover nearly all the major aspects of a modern society. Each social institution fulfills tasks on behalf of society. Structural functionalism calls these tasks functions. There are two types of functions: manifest functions and latent functions.



Studying is an important part of your role as a student.

Tetra Images, LLC / Alamy Stock Photo

Manifest Functions

The obvious, stated reasons that a social institution exists are known as **manifest functions**. Structural functionalists maintain that manifest functions of each institution fulfill necessary tasks in society. For example, let's look at the social institution of the family. One function the family performs is to encourage individuals to procreate—to have children. Otherwise, a society would likely die after one generation, wouldn't it? So, a manifest function of the family institution in any society is reproduction. But institutions can have more than one manifest function. Families are also responsible for raising and instructing their children. For example, families teach children the cultural norms (rules for behavior) and values of their particular society, a process known as socialization.

Consider K–12 education as a social institution. What tasks does the education institution do for society? It teaches those in school the knowledge that society says is important to know to become a contributing adult member of that society. In the United States today, that includes grammar, spelling, mathematics, U.S. and world history, and basic computer skills.

Latent Functions

Latent functions are unintended and often unrecognized consequences of an action or social practice. These are not the explicit intentions behind the action but, rather, the hidden or indirect outcomes that can influence society in various ways.

Let's return to the family institution for a moment. We know that its manifest function is to reproduce and then socialize children, so that the society can continue indefinitely into the future. But family as a social institution supports the society in many other ways. Families help the economic institution, for example, when they purchase food or school supplies or pay rent or buy a house. Helping the economy is a good thing, but it is not a family's core function.

Sometimes behavioral patterns have unintended negative consequences, called **dysfunctions**. For example, the United States built the interstate highway system to move people and products more quickly from location to location, which helps the economic institution. But that good idea also led to an increase in air pollution (a latent dysfunction). Because highways made it so much easier to get to and from places in a car, more people purchased cars and chose to drive, leading to worse air quality for everyone.

Seeing the Social World Using Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism is a macro-theoretical perspective. It looks at society as a whole and focuses on the institutions, rather than individuals, within it. When they put on structural functionalism's glasses, sociologists view society from a distance and look for social order and harmony.

In looking at the big picture of society, functionalist sociologists focus less on discrete individuals and their daily lives and interactions with one another and more on social institutions and how they fit together to build social harmony and stability. So, for example, structural functionalists study the institution of the family, not individual families, to learn how that institution is meeting (or not meeting) societal needs. Although particular families may not have to fulfill each of the functions carried out by the overall institution, the family—as a social institution—must carry out certain functions (feeding, clothing, housing, loving, and socializing children) in order for society to function smoothly. By concentrating on social institutions, structural functionalism focuses on the social patterns common across all families and how those patterns affect and are affected by the rest of society.

Using the structural functionalist lens, sociologists see that social institutions work together to create stability and order. In large part, this is because several institutions (e.g., family, government, education) cooperate to socialize each of us into adhering to the same set of cultural norms and values. Thus, American drivers stay on the right side of the road, we stop at stop signs, we more or less follow the speed limit, and so on. In stable societies, the vast majority of people adhere to the rules of their society and can count on others to do the same.

Curbing Violations of Social Norms

But what about an individual who chooses to act against those shared cultural norms? How does structural functionalism see that person? First and foremost, that person—for whatever reason—is violating social norms. Perhaps that person's parents failed to properly teach their children society's rules for behavior. Or the person may know the norms but consider them unfair (see Chapter 6). Or perhaps the person might simply be selfish and putting their needs ahead of what is best for society.

So, let's talk about a bank robber for a moment. They should have learned from family, teachers, and perhaps religious leaders that robbing a bank is not socially acceptable behavior. But despite those socializing messages, the person still chose to rob a bank. The person has stepped outside of the moral order of the community and must be punished (once caught, of course). But why? Why is punishment

needed? Structural functionalist theorists believe that punishment is required for at least two reasons. First, accepting one's punishment is a step in the rehabilitation and resocialization process of the individual back into the community (if deemed possible). Second, structural functionalist theorists, building on the sociological work of Émile Durkheim, also worry that without punishment, "bad" behavior will spread like an epidemic in the community. If you were a customer in the bank and saw the bank robber get a bunch of money and never get caught, you might try to do so too. And then a third person might see you do that act of unpunished bad behavior and feel like they too can break some other law, and so on. Soon, the social order will have broken down completely. So structural functionalists note the importance of punishing the deviant individual to "head off" future deviant acts—not only by that person but by others in the society who might use that person as a role model.

Social Change

Given this background, you can begin to predict how structural functionalist theorists view social change. What is social change? Sociologists see change happening when there are large-scale, macro, structural shifts in society or institutions within one or more societies. Functionalists tend to be wary of social change because they see harmony deriving from the stable functioning of institutions and cooperation among them. Change in one institution rips apart the social harmony and equilibrium between it and the other institutions. The other social institutions have to make their own changes to adjust and reestablish social equilibrium. So, theorists using a structural functionalist perspective would argue that if change is needed, it should be done slowly so as not to upset the equilibrium that undergirds the society and makes it strong.



We avoid accidents in traffic circles by following the norms for their use.

iStockphoto.com/pro6x7

What Doesn't Structural Functionalism See?

Can rapid social change and the disharmony that comes along with it ever be a good thing for society to experience? Structural functionalist theorists would argue that no, it wouldn't—indeed couldn't—be a good thing. But think about that more deeply and use your sociological imagination.

Imagine we could go back in time to the mid-1940s, just after World War II ended. Pick nearly any town in the United States; what was it like? Let's just focus on one social institution—the economy. Most likely, many men were just returning from fighting overseas, and many women were still in the paid



Sometimes, however, functionalists note that immediate change is crucial for the well-being of society. For example, during World War II, U.S. society needed women to work in formerly male-dominated jobs like these in the Douglas Aircraft factory in California. The social institutions of the government and economy had to adjust to this change in the family (e.g., by encouraging women to work in such factories and providing daycare for employees who were working mothers).

Granger, NYC—all rights reserved

workforce. During the war, more women entered the paid labor force as men went off to fight. As the war ended, many men came back home and wanted, even needed, their jobs back. Some women wanted to go back to working primarily in the home, but others didn't. Of course, some—those widowed by the war, for instance—had to keep working to pay the family's bills. Many women were upset when they were urged to leave the labor force and return home to have babies and keep house. They resented the fact that their job opportunities were once again limited to just a few fields, such as nursing and education.

How would functionalists evaluate this situation? Functionalists might recognize the issue of sex discrimination in the labor force but would likely express concern over the potential social upheaval that could result from abruptly outlawing gender discrimination in the workplace. They would ponder the reactions of men returning from war and the possibility of social unrest stemming from their difficulties in securing employment, given the number of women occupying traditionally male-dominated roles. Therefore, most functionalists would favor slow and incremental changes to avoid immediate upheaval. They might suggest that women return to unpaid labor in the short term, while also promoting public discussions and education on the benefits of gradually changing laws and regulations that discriminate against women in the workforce. This approach reflects their preference for maintaining social stability while cautiously moving towards gender equality in the workplace.

But another way of thinking about slow, gradual social change is that it would allow continued discrimination. Structural functionalism, by focusing on the need for social order and harmony, can overlook times in the life of the society when rapid social change—even if it may lead to some social chaos—is the just thing to do.

Using Structural Functionalism to Analyze the Case of the Meitiv Family

We will now make use of the structural functionalist perspective to examine an incident that hit the news in 2015: the case of Danielle and Alexander Meitiv; their two children, Rafi, age 10, and Dvora, age 6; the Montgomery County, Maryland, police; and Child Protective Services (CPS) of Maryland (for more about this case, including video, check out the sources at the end of the chapter). On December

20, 2014, the Meitiv children were at a local park at 5 p.m. and started to walk the one mile back to their house, alone. Three blocks from their destination, police stopped the children, put them in their squad car, and brought them to police headquarters. Later that night, they were placed in the custody of CPS. The Meitivs did get their children back later that evening but were told that they were under investigation by CPS. Asked why they let their children walk the one mile from the park to their home, they stated that “children learn self-reliance by being allowed to make choices, build independence and progressively experience the world on their own” (St. George 2015c, paragraph 16). Almost two months later, CPS completed its investigation, with a finding of “unsubstantiated child abuse” (St. George 2015c, paragraph 1). But the case was far from over.

Just a few months later, the parents dropped both children off at another park at 4 p.m. and told them to be home by 6 p.m. At 4:58 p.m., a man walking his dog called local police about two unsupervised children in the park. The man did not approach or talk with the children before placing the call. Police detained both children again, taking them immediately to CPS, where they were held without being allowed to contact their parents for more than five hours. CPS launched another investigation of their parents, questioning their ability to protect and parent their children correctly.

Why might the Meitiv parents allow their children to walk home alone? Are they just bad parents, too lazy to take proper care of them? No. The Meitivs practice what is called “free-range parenting,” a parenting philosophy that encourages parents to allow children to grow up independently, with a minimum of adult supervision, appropriate to the age of the children. Free-range parents feel that these days, U.S. society prevents children from learning to be truly self-sufficient.

Let’s analyze the situation at this point. From a structural functionalist perspective, the manifest functions of the family as a social institution are to reproduce and then socialize the children to accept and follow the prevailing values in society. Obviously, the Meitivs have children, so their family has met that first manifest function. Where this example gets murky is when we shift our attention to the second manifest function.



Alexander Meitiv, right, prepares dinner with the help of his daughter, Dvora, and son, Rafi. The Meitivs’ “free-range parenting” led to their facing charges of child neglect.

Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post/Getty Images

The United States as a society values individualism and independence, and therefore parents are expected to teach their children to be self-reliant and independent. The devil’s in the details, though. *How* should they teach them independence and at *what* age? Are children aged 6 and 10 too young to

be walking alone on a moderately busy street? Is it abuse or neglect if a parent teaches this particular instance of self-reliance “too soon” (i.e., at a time when many in society feel it is inappropriate)? And should parents who do so be judged “bad parents” by authorities—in this case, law enforcement and CPS?

This second investigation by CPS ended with “neglect ‘ruled out’” (St. George 2015a, paragraphs 1, 7), and the case was closed. A spokesperson for Maryland’s Department of Human Resources (to which CPS reports) added that “a child playing outside or walking unsupervised does not meet the criteria for a CPS response absent specific information supporting the conclusion that the child has been harmed or is at substantial risk of harm if they continue to be unsupervised” (St. George 2015a, paragraph 10).

Notice how this case shows the interrelatedness of social institutions (e.g., family and government), which is at the core of structural functionalism. Those using a structural functionalist perspective likely would leave unquestioned the assumption that family, law enforcement, and CPS all had a duty to be concerned about children in general and the Meitivs’ two children in particular. Each agency’s duty and, therefore, their employees’ behavior were grounded in its manifest function.

Structural functionalists would likely argue that today, in a populous community like Montgomery County, Maryland, most parents would not allow a 6-year-old to play unsupervised and walk back home at night, even in the company of a 10-year-old sibling. If this *is* the value consensus, then law enforcement and CPS’s decisions to take the children into custody and investigate their home life could be easily justified as correct. CPS’s initial review was meant to teach the Meitivs how to better parent their children and, simultaneously, to reinforce proper parenting behaviors to all who live in the country.

Could other sociologists look at the story of what happened to the Meitiv family and reach different sociological conclusions? Let’s turn next to the other macro-sociological theoretical perspective—conflict—and look at how sociologists using that perspective see social reality. Then we’ll return to the Meitiv family as our example.

Consider This 2.1

What aspects of structural functionalism do you agree with the most? Least? Explain.

Doing Sociology 2.1

Manifest and Latent Functions

What is structural functionalism?

In this exercise, you will review manifest and latent functions and the major social institutions.

Write your answers to the following questions.

1. Reflect on Personal Observations:
Think about a major social institution you interact with frequently (such as education, family, or healthcare). Describe your personal experiences and observations about this institution in a few sentences.
2. Identify Functions:
Manifest Function: In 2–3 sentences, identify and describe one manifest function of your chosen institution based on your observations. How is this function explicitly intended to contribute to society?
Latent Function: In 2–3 sentences, identify and describe one latent function of the same institution that you have noticed but is not explicitly stated as an objective. How does this function unintentionally contribute to or harm society?

3. Short Analysis:

In 2–3 sentences, explain why individuals and policymakers must recognize both types of functions in social institutions, based on your example.

4. Scenario Application:

School Board Decision: Imagine you are advising a school board considering a 4-day school week. Briefly list two potential latent functions of the traditional 5-day school week that this change might impact. Consider aspects like community, student well-being, or parental work schedules.

Instructor's Note

To conduct this reflective activity on manifest and latent functions within structural functionalism effectively, instructors can adapt their approach to suit both in-person and asynchronous online environments. In an in-person setting, start with a concise introduction to the key concepts to ensure a common foundation. Allocate time efficiently: a couple of minutes for individual reflection on a chosen social institution, followed by a brief period for writing down insights on its functions, and conclude with a sharing session where students discuss their findings. This format fosters interactive learning and allows students to connect sociological theories to personal experiences. For asynchronous online classes, post clear instructions and encourage students to share their reflections on a discussion board. This facilitates peer interaction and allows for diverse perspectives to emerge. Instructors should provide feedback either through comments on individual posts or a summary video to deepen the understanding of the activity's concepts.

Regardless of the setting, the emphasis should be on encouraging students to draw from personal observations and experiences. This approach not only demystifies abstract concepts by linking them to everyday life but also promotes critical thinking and the appreciation of the practical relevance of sociological theories. Through this activity, students will engage with the material actively, enhancing their grasp of structural functionalism in a manner that is both insightful and personally meaningful.

Check Your Understanding

1. What do structural functionalists see as the role of institutions in society?
2. Why do structural functionalists want social change to happen slowly?
3. What social institutions were involved in the Meitiv incidents?
4. Can you retell the story of the Meitiv family using the structural functionalist concepts of social institutions and manifest function?

Understanding the Conflict Theoretical Perspective

Sociologists using the second macro-theoretical perspective, the **conflict perspective**, view society very differently from those looking at it from a functionalist perspective. Instead of seeing society as groups of institutions working together for the good of the whole, conflict theorists believe that society is composed of groups competing for power.

Karl Marx and Advanced Capitalism

Karl Marx, the founder of the conflict perspective, believed that there were 10 stages of societal development, but he was most concerned with the last 3 stages. Given that, we'll start with stage 8, advanced capitalism. Marx held that advanced capitalism is an economic system based on the pursuit of maximum profit. Capitalism divides people into two major categories and a third, smaller group. There

are the bourgeoisie, the rich owners of the **means of production** (the technology and materials needed to produce products, such as factories), and the proletariat, the poor workers (in the factories, etc.). The perpetually unemployed constitute the third group, the lumpenproletariat.

The advanced capitalism of Marx's time was a far cry from what we know capitalism to be today in the United States. Because there were no labor laws and it was so much cheaper to hire children than adults, the labor force included many children. There were no inspectors making sure that the workplace was safe, so many among the proletariat were injured. There was no worker's compensation insurance either, so injured members of the proletariat faced a difficult choice: show up and work despite the injury (but face the wrath of the owner for working slower) or quit work to heal—and starve. Wages were incredibly low because the bourgeoisie could use the ever growing pool of the lumpenproletariat as a stick over any worker who dared ask for a raise. Such a worker would be fired, as it was very easy to find a member of the lumpenproletariat who would work for the original wage (or an even lower one).

False Consciousness

For Marx and like-minded individuals of the time period, the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie was a bit puzzling at first. Why didn't the proletariat realize how economically exploited they were under advanced capitalism? Who didn't they organize themselves and all agree to stop working for such low wages? Surely that would upend the capitalist system that exploited them so grievously.

Marx theorized that the workers were in a state of **false consciousness**. They collectively and individually did not understand that they and the owners had different self-interests. They were, he argued, misled to believe that what was good for the owner also benefited them. They believed that, if they just worked hard every day, they too might become members of the bourgeoisie. The media of the day, the religious institution, and the political institution all promulgated this: a good worker, in time, could “strike it rich” and get in on the many advantages of capitalism. But that was not going to happen for most of the proletariat; they lived on subsistence wages while the factory owner lived in a huge home, profiting from the proletariat's hard work. Yet their false consciousness kept them from seeing the reality of their lives—as members of the proletariat, they were compelled to work in a factory, sewing button after button for 16 hours a day, for the rest of their lives. Was this really what life should be, Marx asked?

Alienation

No, it was not. The human race had what Marx called species being—the unique potential to imagine and then create what we imagine. Humans can sketch fantastically intricate designs and then make them become real in the world. No other animal can do that. But the proletariat were prevented from living up to their species being by the very nature of the capitalist exploitation they endured. They lived in a state of **alienation** that left them laboring for others and separated from what they created. Their monotonous jobs were small and repetitious; they often never even knew what the finished product of their labor looked like. Worse yet, they couldn't afford the products they were making.

Karl Marx and Socialism

Marx felt that the proletariat could move from false consciousness to **true consciousness** if they came to grips with the depths of their exploitation by the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system they controlled. He believed that his writing, along with that of others, would “wake them up” from their state of alienated false consciousness and lead them to bring about change in their society.

Marx predicted that when the proletarian revolution began, society would move from the eighth stage of societal development, advanced capitalism, into the ninth stage, socialism. This ninth stage was a sort of “working it out” stage of social change. Economically, things would be more just than under capitalism but not yet truly equal. In socialism, children would be off the factory floors and sent to free public schools while able-bodied adults would work. The state would take over the means of production from the bourgeoisie through imposing a heavy progressive income tax on all adult citizens. This tax would economically hurt only the bourgeoisie (although many in that group were expected to die in

the revolution). A proletariat worker, with almost no income, would not have to pay much. Also, new inheritance laws would ensure that rich families would no longer be able to pass money, property, and other expensive goods down to the next generation of their families. After a bourgeoisie died, the socialist government would “inherit” the rest of their money and goods and redistribute it to the citizens.

Socialism, Marx predicted, would last a few generations. He felt that the values of capitalism, such as support for the accumulation of wealth in the hands of just a few, the acquisition of goods as a sign of high status, and so forth, would take a while to die out. It might take a generation or two with people who had grown up only under socialism as an economic system before society would be ready for the tenth stage of social development: communism.

Karl Marx and Communism

Marx believed that after a few generations of socialism as an economic system, some of the key social institutions, such as the political and economic systems, would no longer be needed and would disappear. Under **communism**, all citizens would be equal and, at long last, able to fulfill their species being. Each person could contemplate and then go create. There would be no social classes under communism because every person would make the same wage for work done.

All of these stages of social change are economic ones, and Marx is often called an economic determinist. The social institution that was the base of the society, for him, was always the economy. He believed that as the economy changed from advanced capitalism to socialism and ultimately to communism, the other six social institutions would necessarily change and adapt. Marx’s vision of communism never became a reality, not even in nations that refer to themselves as communist.

From Marx to the Conflict Perspective

Marx’s theory, however, became the intellectual foundation for our second macro-theoretical perspective: the conflict perspective. Expanding upon Marx’s analysis, conflict theorists recognize many ways in which social rewards are unequally distributed. In recent years, several scholars have expanded on Marx’s analysis of class to explore inequalities such as those related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. These thinkers have adapted and extended Marxist theory to address how these dimensions of identity intersect with economic and social structures: They talk about the haves—those individuals and social institutions that gain access to more of society’s scarce rewards—and the have-nots—those unable to get even their fair share of social rewards because of their category membership.

Seeing the Social World Using the Conflict Perspective

Again, conflict is a macro-theoretical perspective; it analyzes society as a whole. But whereas structural functionalist theorists examine society and see social order and harmony, conflict theorists see something completely different. They see oppression: the haves holding the have-nots back to maintain their own elevated status.

Conflict theorists notice patterns of inequitable distribution of resources and rewards. They would note which groups in society have the most power and representation in the major institutions in society (e.g., who are our government and religious leaders, media owners, school board members, and sports team owners?). Sociologists using this perspective would also note how the structure of society perpetuates inequality by placing hurdles in front of some groups but not others. For example, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the cost of tuition has led many students into debt. Why? Whom does this benefit and whom does it hurt?

Many conflict theorists aren’t satisfied with merely recognizing such inequalities; they go that next step and suggest ways that they and others can reduce, if not completely eliminate, the oppression that they observe. Like Marx, sociologists who take a conflict perspective advocate social change to help the have-nots in society to gain more of society’s rewards. And unlike most structural functionalists, who want social change to be slow and gradual so as not to upset the social harmony between social institutions, conflict theorists believe that social change to alleviate social injustice should be

done rapidly. For conflict thinkers, slow, gradual social change is merely another term for continued oppression. They want to help the have-nots—now.

What Doesn't the Conflict Perspective See?

The conflict perspective is so laser focused on oppression and making life better for the have-nots that it can overlook moments when society is going along fairly well. By concerning itself primarily with injustices and oppression, conflict can overlook times of societal harmony and equilibrium. Moreover, conflict theorists do not always acknowledge how disruptive and harmful change can be—for the have-nots as well as the haves.

Theories under the Umbrella of the Conflict Perspective

The conflict perspective, although unified in the focus on oppression and efforts to combat it, contains many types of conflict theories within it. For example, feminist conflict theorists argue that men as a category of people have greater access to social rewards than women (see Chapter 8). Critical race theorists focus on the social construction of race and the White-dominated racial hierarchy (see Chapter 9). All conflict theorists, however, build on Marx's insight that some individuals and groups have more resources and rewards than others do and that this is unjust.

Disability scholars frequently use the conflict perspective to analyze how modern Western societies create the built environment (the architecture of public and private spaces) in ways that work for the able-bodied but not for people living with disabilities. Why, for example, cannot every entrance to a building include a ramp? A few decades ago, few buildings had ramps for people using wheelchairs. Today, often only one entrance is "made accessible." Notice that the language used implies that creating accessibility is an "extra," something that must be added to a structure rather than an organic part of every building. With that kind of a mind-set, it becomes easy to see that "normal bodies" are the standard against which all others are judged. Those of us with disabilities, then, are somehow lesser, deviant people and less deserving of access. As you can see, the fundamental assumption of the modern conflict theoretical perspective is still rooted in Marx's insight: the social rewards of society are not equally shared.

Using the Conflict Perspective to Understand the Meitiv Family

Now turn your attention back to the Meitiv family, who advocated free-range parenting, an approach to parenting that encourages teaching children to be independent and autonomous from an early age. How might the conflict perspective analyze what happened to them? Recall the conflict perspective's basic assumption: different categories of people get different social rewards on the basis of their location in the social structure. In the family's interactions with law enforcement and CPS, you can see a power imbalance right away.

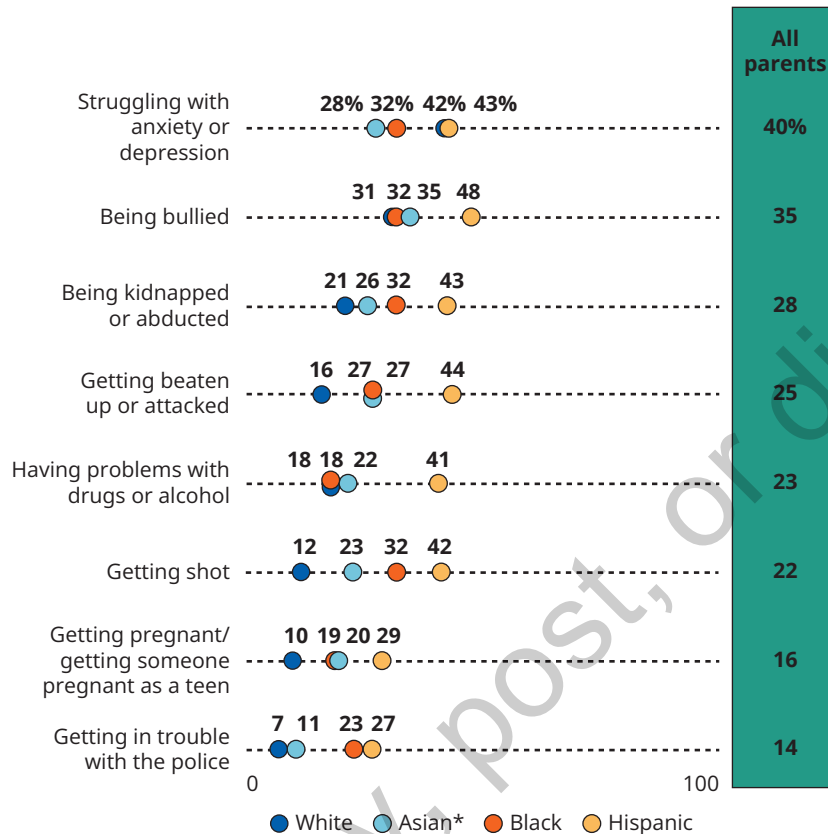
An anonymous person placed a call to the police—without even talking to the children in question. Recall that the police and CPS detained the children before any investigation occurred. True, law enforcement and CPS workers were simply performing their jobs, but they represented the state and all its power. Although highly educated people (Alexander is a theoretical physicist, Danielle a climate science consultant), the Meitivs discovered that they had not—at least in that moment—either the power or the freedom to decide how to raise their own offspring. And who had even less power in this situation? The children. Their feelings were ignored throughout the bureaucratic wrangling.

Now imagine the story playing out a bit differently. The family in question did not have an intact set of two parents but instead was led by a single parent. A poor, single parent. A poor, single parent of color working several jobs to make ends meet. Do you think that—at each step of the Meitivs' story—this poor single parent of color would have been treated the same way as the Meitivs were? Would he or she have gotten the kids back the night of the first "walking alone" incident? Still gotten the kids back after the second incident of their walking alone? Had neglect "ruled out" after the second incident? Had enough money to possibly sue CPS and law enforcement? In fact, would anyone even have called law enforcement if they had seen two children of color walking alone? Or if there had been a call, might it

have been less about concern for the children's *safety* and more about "what are those kids up to" (i.e., someone worried about what possible criminal behavior they might be about to do)?

Figure 2.1 ■ Parenting and Race

% of parents saying they are extremely or very worried about each of the following happening to any of their children at some point



Source: Pew Research Center, 2023, Survey of U.S. parents conducted Sept. 20–Oct. 2, 2022. "Parenting in America Today." <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/race-ethnicity-and-parenting/>.

Notes: White, Black, and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. *Estimates for Asian adults are representative of English speakers only.

Consider the 2014 South Carolina case involving Debra Harrell, a 46-year-old African American woman, and her 9-year-old daughter Regina. Debra worked at a McDonald's and, lacking other childcare options, often had to bring her child with her. The girl would usually sit in the restaurant until her mother was done working, but on three days that summer, Debra allowed her child to play in a popular park about a mile away. On the third day, a parent of another child at the park asked Regina where her parents were. Alarmed when Regina told her that her mom was working, the parent called the police. The police then arrested Debra on the charge of felony child neglect and placed Regina in foster care. Debra was released on \$5,000 bail, but Regina remained in foster care for 17 days before being returned to her mother. Debra's arrest also meant that she lost her job (until media coverage pressured the local McDonald's to take her back) (CBS News 2014; Friedersdorf 2014; Reese 2014).

As tense as the Meitiv situation was, their race, education levels, and social class likely buffered them from the full power of CPS and the police. Low-income families, like Debra Harrell and her daughter, cannot afford to hire a private attorney. Often these families do not have an opportunity to quickly "fix" the situation. Parental concerns also tend to differ by race, impacting different racial groups' perceptions of whether free-range parenting would benefit or potentially harm their children. Parents of Black and

Hispanic children are more likely to fear for their children's safety than White and Asian parents, as seen in Figure 2.1. As we describe in more detail in later chapters, their fears are well founded. Black and Hispanic children tend to live in more dangerous neighborhoods and have more negative interactions with police than White and many Asian parents. Also, note that the Meitivs had enough time and money to chaperone their kids, if they chose to do so. Free range parenting is a *choice* for them. Debra had no such choice. She could either make her daughter stay with her at work (and, no doubt, be bored and inactive) or let her spend that time on a playground without her.



Nine-year-old Regina Harrell's mother was arrested and lost custody of Regina for almost three weeks because she allowed Regina to play in a park a block away from where she was working at a McDonald's.

AP Photo/Jeffrey Collins

Consider This 2.2

From what viewpoint do conflict theorists view society? Do you share this perspective? Why?

Doing Sociology 2.2

Using the Conflict Perspective to Understand How Parents' Perceptions Differ by Race

What is a conflict perspective?

Recall the conflict perspective's basic assumption that different categories of people face different life experiences based on their location in the social structure. Now consider Figure 2.1 and answer the following questions:

1. In a sentence or two, describe how conflict theorists view race and racial groupings.
2. Imagine you are a conflict theorist. In a paragraph or so, use findings from this figure to explain how race and racism in U.S. society might influence whether parents choose to use free range parenting styles (or not).

3. How does the conflict perspective help you better understand how your social status in society based on your race, social class, gender, etc. affects all aspects of your life, including how you raise your children?

Instructor's Note

This activity requires students to interpret data through the conflict perspective. It can be used in any type of class. We suggest you have students complete the activity individually and then share and compare their answers in groups.

Check Your Understanding

1. According to Marx, why are the proletariat in a state of false consciousness in advanced capitalism?
2. How does a society move from advanced capitalism to socialism, according to Marx?
3. Can you explain the difference between socialism and communism?
4. What are the conceptual differences between the terms *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat* and *haves* and *have-nots*? Can you correctly use these terms?
5. What are two examples of conflict theories that fall under the umbrella of the conflict perspective?

Understanding the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Macro-theoretical perspectives let sociologists see the big picture (the macro unit of analysis) of what is happening in the entire society, be it order and harmony (structural functionalism) or oppression (conflict). These theoretical lenses, however, miss something vital to the study of people in groups: interaction between individuals—the micro level. **Symbolic interaction** provides that theoretical balance for sociology. As the micro-theoretical perspective, it asks questions macro perspectives do not. For example, we can use it to examine how any one person develops a **self**—a sense of our place in society and who we are in relation to others. It helps us study how groups of people create shared knowledge and perceptions of their world. Symbolic interactionists view society as a social construction, continually constructed and reconstructed by individuals through their use of shared symbols.

The Social Construction of Reality

Interactionist theorists examine the formation of **culture**, the lifestyle shared by a specific group of people, by looking at how individuals with common goals gather and interact. As these interactions continue over time, they regularly incorporate them into their daily routines. So, for example, when the individuals first interact, they may create a common greeting. That greeting gets repeated every time they meet, and suddenly they have created a norm—an expectation about behavior. Now individuals *must* use this now standardized greeting or else be judged by the group as deviant. These creators of the greeting continue to use it, further normalizing it for their group. They will then teach new members (either born into the group or converts to it) the greeting and pass it along to the next generation.

In effect, the group constructs its culture (see Chapter 4). Culture includes norms and the symbols through which we communicate (e.g., language, numbers, gestures, and the meaning we attach to objects such as a nation's flag, a swastika, and a cross). Culture also consists of values, what we believe to be good or bad, and material objects the group creates to make life easier and meaningful. All of these are social constructions. This raises a significant sociological question: how does this socially constructed

content (i.e., culture) get “inside” each person? Interactionists argue that it happens through the process of socialization, the sharing of culture from generation to generation.

Although we experience socialization throughout our lives, the most intense time for socialization is in childhood (what we often call **primary socialization**), so that will be our focus. George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, the founders of the symbolic interactionist perspective, both emphasized the importance of the socialization process. You will learn more about their work in Chapter 5. In this chapter, we will focus on Cooley’s contributions. Through his “looking glass self” theory, he described how a child develops a sense of self in three steps.

The Looking Glass Self Theory

A child’s first step in developing a sense of self is to imagine how they appear to relevant others—their parents, siblings, grandparents, and so on. Cooley argued that, since we cannot directly know others’ thoughts or feelings, the child tries to put themselves in the shoes of the other person and then contemplates what that other person is feeling about them. So, they might imagine, “I think my parents love me.”

In the second step, the child reacts to the feedback the parents and others give about their perceptions toward the child. That feedback could be verbal (e.g., “I love you”) or nonverbal (e.g., holding hands, hugging, smiling). What is important in this step, Cooley argued, is that the child is responding to what they feel the feedback means about them. The child perceives who they are (to others—and thus to themselves) via feedback from others. These others are the social mirror that the child uses to develop a sense of self.

Finally, in the third step, the child integrates the first two into a coherent and unique sense of self. Interaction with **primary groups** (small collections of people of which a person is a member, usually for life, and in which deep emotional ties develop, such as one’s family of origin) shapes the child’s sense of self. Others in effect become the “mirror” by which each person sees oneself.

Although socialization in childhood is foundational, Cooley would argue that socialization continues throughout a person’s life. A new employee receives feedback from the boss and peers and integrates that feedback into a sense of self as a worker, for example.

Dramaturgy Theory

Interaction does not just focus on the construction of the self. Erving Goffman (1959) was a sociologist who said that life was like a play—a drama—in which we are all actors. He created dramaturgy theory to explain interaction among small groups by looking at the social actors (the individuals involved in the interaction), the social scripts the actors follow, and the props (material objects) the actors use to enhance their performances. Goffman also looked at the settings where interactions take place. Two of the key ones are the **front stage** (where the interaction takes place) and the **back stage** (where one prepares for the interaction).

According to Goffman, we each try to control the vibe we give off to others. Each of us uses **presentation of self** skills—shaping the physical, verbal, visual, and gestural messages that we give to others—to (try to) control their evaluations of us. This is what Goffman called impression management. Let’s say some new friends you’d like to impress invite you to go to a football game, assuming you, like them, love the sport and this particular team. You have never gone to a football game or paid much attention to the sport, but you’d like to fit in with your friends. Your roommate helps you (back stage) dress appropriately by lending you her sweatshirt with the team’s mascot emblazoned on it and gives you a quick lesson on how football is played and the key players on the team. She also tells you that your friends may well expect you to eat and drink with them outside the stadium before the game.

You join your new friends outside the stadium (front stage). The pregame eating and drinking goes without a hitch, and your new friends tell you how happy they are to have found you, a fellow fan of their beloved team. All goes well until you get into the stadium and the game begins. Suddenly, everyone—except you—is chanting in unison at the top of their lungs a cheer for one of the players. You don’t know any of the names of the players. Your roommate forgot to fill you in on this part of the script!

Goffman's work helps us see that the world is a stage and we are all actors as we interact with one another. Like other theories under the symbolic interactionist perspective, dramaturgy allows us to understand why individuals behave differently in various social settings. In turn, this knowledge can help us navigate our social world successfully.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a way of understanding how societies create their own rules, values, and meanings for different things. This theory points out that people in society get different rewards; some have more, and some have less. Social constructionists believe that these differences, like who has more money or power, are made by people and can be changed to be fairer.

Expanding on this idea, constructionists say it's really important to look at big issues like poverty in a new way. Instead of just looking at poor people one by one, they think we should understand poverty as something society has created. This means looking at how society decides who is rich and who is poor, and how things like race, gender, age, and technology access play into this. They believe that by changing the way we all think and talk about these issues, we can make a real difference. For example, if everyone thinks poverty can't be fixed, then leaders might not try to fix it. But if people start believing that we can and should make things better, then leaders will feel more pressure to come up with good plans to help reduce poverty. The way the news talks about these efforts can also change people's views, making it even more important to tackle these big issues.

We can use the theory of social constructionism to see how our interactions create different social problems and how we can solve them. In the following *Sociologists in Action*, Chelsea Marty, an undergraduate at Valdosta State University, relates how she used **social constructionism** to understand how the internalization of racism and racial stereotypes can lead to systematic oppression and institutionalized racism. Chelsea also describes the steps she is taking to confront and tackle these social problems.

Sociologists in Action

Courageous Conversations about Race

Chelsea Marty

At Valdosta State University in Georgia, I was involved with a speaker series titled Courageous Conversations about Race (CCR). This series grew out of an effort to address racial tension present on our college campus. We wanted students, faculty, and other members of the community to feel open and safe enough to discuss racial topics and concepts that often go unmentioned. In the process, we hoped to create a campus environment more inclusive and appreciative of diversity.

While working with CCR, I eventually became a member of the organizing and planning team. I, along with my research partner and friend Ashlie Prain, created a student-led CCR series. This series featured students who gave presentations, panels, and performances that focused on racial issues. Topics included White supremacy, colorism, intersectionality, police brutality, and race and politics.

During one CCR, I presented on the research project "The Path of Our Narratives," which I conducted with Ashlie. Using narratives of racism encountered in childhoods, we discussed the early internalization of racism and racial stereotypes. We then connected the early socialization of such biases to systematic oppression and institutionalized racism.

My presentation and approach to working on this series are closely related to the sociological theory of social constructionism. Social constructionists focus on the social construction of reality and how interpretations and experiences shape our social structure. This is evident in my presentation, as I point out how childhood experiences of racism can be linked to the institutionalization of racism itself.

For example, in one narrative, a young White girl shares her experience of being moved from a predominantly Black school to a predominantly White school. As a child, she was told that this move was for her own good and that she would make better friends and have better opportunities. Although this individual story may seem insignificant, it actually is indicative of the racial biases used to structure our school system. Such biases contribute to the segregation, underfunding, and lack of resources that severely damage the quality of education that marginalized groups in our society receive.

Additionally, the series as a whole reflected how social interpretations of race have influenced our actions, relationships, politics, and much more. Through an understanding of the theory of social constructionism, we can collectively work to recognize and dismantle racial biases and stereotypes.

Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of CCR is that, in addition to sparking conversation and promoting education, it inspires action and encourages community involvement. Several individuals from the community have taken on the responsibility of planning more talks and campaigns that address racial issues within our community, and I look forward to being a part of those efforts.

Discussion Question: How can understanding the theory of social constructionism help you recognize and dismantle racial biases and stereotypes?

Chelsea Marty was an undergraduate at Valdosta State who went on to get a master's degree in sociology and currently works as a program support specialist for a federal grant program called Upward Bound.

What Doesn't Symbolic Interaction See?

As a micro perspective, symbolic interaction zooms in on how people interact and understand the world in their daily lives, focusing on personal interactions and the meanings we create. However, it might not give enough attention to the bigger picture of society, such as the deep-rooted issues of inequality and how society is structured, which are key points in conflict theory and functionalism. While symbolic interaction offers valuable insights into our personal and immediate social interactions, it does not capture the full scope of how larger social forces and structures impact our lives and keep society organized which the conflict and structural functionalist perspectives address more directly.

Using Symbolic Interaction to Understand the Meitiv Family

We now return to the Meitiv family one last time, to examine their situation through the lens of symbolic interaction. Danielle and Alexander Meitiv socialized their children by modeling appropriate behavior and incrementally giving them more responsibility. They then provided feedback to the children on their behavior. Part of that socialization process involved having the children walk together short distances. The parents followed behind the children, without their knowledge, to observe their behavior during these solo outings. What they saw led them to trust that their children could cope with any possibilities that might occur when they walked the mile home from school together. These successful outings boosted the children's self-concepts. Danielle described the reasoning behind their socialization methods, saying that "I think it's absolutely critical for their development—to learn responsibility, to experience the world, to gain confidence and competency" (St. George 2015b, paragraph 6).

"We wouldn't have let them do it if we didn't think they were ready for it," Danielle said. She said her son and daughter have previously paired up for walks around the block, to a nearby 7-Eleven and to a library about three quarters of a mile away. "They have proven they are responsible," she said. "They've developed these skills." (St. George 2015b, paragraph 4)

But while the Meitiv parents felt that they were properly socializing their children, others did not see the children's behavior in the same way. They wondered if the children had enough life experience to cope with whatever might happen. When they went on longer walks, the children often carried a card the family had created, which read, "I am not lost. I am a free-range kid" (St. George 2015b, paragraph 11). Without that prop—a symbolic piece of information—the police officers who responded had little

information to go on about who the children were and why they were out alone and therefore took them into protective custody.

As the family became caught up in the CPS legal system, Danielle claimed that these authority figures were attempting to socialize her children to be fearful, in contrast to the parents' view that the world, overall, was a safe place for children:

My son told us that the social worker who questioned him asked, "What would you do if someone grabbed you?" and suggested that he tell us that he doesn't want to go off on his own anymore because it's dangerous and that there are "bad guys waiting to grab you." This is how adults teach children to be afraid even when they are not in danger. (Meitiv 2015, paragraph 7)

The Meitiv story spread as national media picked up the story, and more and more individuals began to weigh in publicly, writing comments on online news articles and other social media. Many parents supported the Meitivs, but others criticized their free-range parenting style. Their story showed that there are competing cultural understandings of what it means to be a child and to be a parent in U.S. culture.

A social movement in support of free-range parenting sprang up, leading to a petition to change Maryland's laws. Today, Maryland's laws remain the same, but the movement exists across the nation, and Utah became the first state to pass a "free-range parenting" law, in 2018. Utah's law protects parents from charges of abuse for "permitting a child, whose basic needs are met and who is of sufficient age and maturity to avoid harm or unreasonable risk of harm, to engage in independent activities." These activities include "traveling to and from school, including by walking, running, or bicycling; traveling to and from nearby commercial or recreational facilities; and remaining at home unattended" (Utah State Legislature 2018, lines 316–22). As of 2024, seven other states, including Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Montana, Connecticut, Virginia, and Illinois, have passed such laws.

Consider This 2.3

Which of the theories discussed under the Symbolic Interactionist perspective did you find most enlightening? Why?

Doing Sociology 2.3

Visualizing the Symbolic Construction of Campus Culture

What is symbolic interaction?

Symbolic interactionists note that we create and continually recreate our society and different aspects of it through our use of symbols and interactions with one another. In this activity, you will explore and visually represent how symbols, including language, shape the culture and social interactions on our campus through the lens of symbolic interactionism.

Directions

Make sure you have drawing materials: paper and pencils, or a digital drawing app on your tablet or computer and complete the following steps.

1. Grasp Symbolic Interactionism (3 minutes):

Review this section on symbolic interactionism: it's a perspective in sociology that shows us how we use symbols, like language, gestures, and images, to create and navigate the social world around us. These symbols are the building blocks of our campus culture and personal identities.

2. Observe and Reflect (5 minutes):

Take a thoughtful walk around a familiar part of campus or visualize a space where you often spend time. Pay close attention to the various symbols around you, including written and spoken language, logos, mascots, architectural styles, and even the way people dress. Note how these symbols communicate ideas, values, and guide how people interact, contributing to our shared campus identity.

3. Create Your Illustration (7–10 minutes):

Select a symbol or series of symbols that particularly struck you during your observation. Draw them, focusing on capturing not just their appearance but also their underlying meanings and how they might influence the way we interact and see ourselves on campus.

Through your drawing, aim to show the connection between these symbols and the construction of our campus life. Creativity is key here—let your artwork speak!

4. Present and Discuss (5 minutes):

Share your artwork with classmates or in a group discussion. Explain your choice of symbols and how you believe they function on your campus within the symbolic interactionism framework.

As your peers present their artwork, appreciate the diverse meanings and significance of symbols in your campus community.

5. Written reflection (2 minutes):

In a paragraph, reflect on your role in the campus culture. How do you interact with and contribute to the symbolic landscape of your campus? Consider how your actions and the symbols you use or create influence the campus social environment.

Instructor's Note

This is a student-driven activity meant to deepen understanding of symbolic interactionism through observation, analysis, and creative expression.

Kick off the activity with a concise explanation of symbolic interactionism, emphasizing the importance of symbols, including language, in constructing social realities.

Stress the value of respectful and non-intrusive observation practices during the exploration phase.

In the discussion phase, guide students to make connections between their visual representations and the sociological concepts under study, fostering a rich dialogue about the multiplicity of meanings within the campus culture.

You can use this activity for in-person and online courses. In online courses you could have students explore all or parts of the school website.

Remind students that the emphasis is on insight and interpretation rather than artistic talent.

Check Your Understanding

1. Why is symbolic interaction a micro-level theoretical perspective?
2. What do sociologists mean by “the self”?
3. According to interactionists, how is society socially constructed?
4. How can different groups of individuals see the same social problem differently? Can you give an original example of this?

Full Theoretical Circle

Every family sets its own child-rearing rules within the bounds of what society deems acceptable. This boundary of acceptability is shaped by societal norms, a concept central to social construction. As behaviors become more accepted over time, they solidify into the standard practices of institutions like the family.

This brings us to how small groups influence larger societal norms, a key interest of symbolic interactionists. They study how individual and group interactions gradually spread certain norms across society, influencing how we understand roles and statuses in key areas of social life. These evolving norms contribute to the formation of social institutions, which, once established, play a significant role in organizing society and guiding individual behavior. Structural functionalists delve into this aspect, examining how these routinized institutions maintain societal stability and order.

Meanwhile, as these social structures develop, disparities in power and resources emerge among different groups—those with more (“the haves”) and those with less (“the have-nots”). Conflict theorists focus on this area, analyzing how power imbalances within social institutions and the wider society affect individuals and groups. This perspective sheds light on the struggles and conflicts arising from these inequalities, highlighting the dynamic interplay between power, society, and social change.

The theoretical perspectives we have discussed give us ways to analyze human behavior. Each perspective (and the many theories it encompasses) offers a unique viewpoint. None of them is the correct one; rather, each of the perspectives gives sociologists a particular lens with which to see human society. Structural functionalists focus on social order and institutions and agreement on the basic values that create and sustain that social order but tend not to notice conflict and inequality. Conflict theorists do just the opposite; they see social problems caused by oppression and injustices but overlook moments of order and social harmony. Neither structural functionalists nor conflict theorists deal with the behavior of small groups, leaving that to symbolic interactionists, who examine how groups create culture and pass it on to the next generation but ignore macro issues of power and control, social harmony, and balance.

Most likely one or more of these perspectives make better sense to you, and that is fine. Practice using all three of them as you look around your social world, however. You will see how you can focus on different angles of society with each.

Consider This 2.4

How can using all three theoretical perspectives help us understand the Meitiv's experience better?

Doing Sociology 2.4

Comparing Theoretical Frameworks

How do the structural functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interaction perspectives work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?

In this exercise, you will point out how each perspective helps you describe your hometown. Write your responses to each of the following prompts.

1. Briefly describe your hometown using each theoretical perspective. Structural functionalism will help you see how different groups work together in social harmony. Conflict theory will highlight social oppression. Looking through the lens of symbolic interactionism will let you notice how small groups in your hometown construct and implement their values and rules.
2. Why does using all three of these theoretical frameworks help you get a more complete view of your hometown?

Check Your Understanding

1. What do sociologists mean when they say no one theoretical perspective is “correct”?
2. On what do conflict theorists focus?
3. On what do structural functionalist theorist focus?
4. On what do symbolic interactionists focus?

Conclusion

Theoretical perspectives frame the social world for sociologists. They highlight some parts of human behavior and blur others. Many sociologists use the lenses of multiple theoretical perspectives to compensate for the theoretical oversights of each perspective. The theoretical language you have learned in this chapter will reemerge in many future chapters, because these are the main ways sociologists see human behavior. Chapter 3 will add to your sociological skill set by showing you the varied ways that sociologists collect data about the social world—to which we then apply theoretical perspectives and theories.

Review

2.1 Why and how do sociologists use theoretical perspectives?

The three theoretical perspectives—structural functionalism, conflict, and symbolic interaction—help sociologists to examine the complexities of social life. They provide structure to the vast data that sociologists gather and allow us to find patterns in human behavior.

2.2 What is structural functionalism?

Structural functionalism is a macro-level theoretical perspective that helps us analyze an entire society and how its parts work together. Structural functionalists tend to see social harmony and social equilibrium, on the basis of the perceived smooth interactions of the seven social institutions. Structural functionalism is a “big-picture” way of viewing societies. Imagine a sociologist standing at a distance and looking at how society and its parts are working together.

2.3 What is a conflict perspective?

Conflict perspectives are macro-level perspectives that analyze entire societies. Whereas structural functionalist theorists examine society and see social order and harmony, conflict theorists see something completely different. They see inequality—the haves holding the have-nots back to maintain their own elevated status. Conflict theories focus on the oppression and injustice at work in society caused by the haves’ excessive political, economic, and social power. Conflict thinkers advocate for rapid social change to give more social rewards to the have-nots.

2.4 What is symbolic interaction?

Symbolic interaction is a micro-level theoretical perspective that focuses on the individual or small groups rather than an entire society. Symbolic interactionists focus on how the self is

constructed through socialization and how a group socially constructs norms and values that then govern the group's behaviors. Symbolic interaction helps us understand how individuals can shape, as well as be shaped by, society. It also helps us study how meaning comes to be constructed and shared by a group of people. Symbolic interactionists view society as a social construction, continually constructed and reconstructed by individuals through their use of shared symbols.

2.5 How do structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interaction work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?

Each of the major theoretical perspectives provides a different view of society. Structural functionalists focus on how the social institutions of society can work together to create and sustain social order but tend to overlook inequality and conflict. Conflict theorists focus on inequality and conflict but tend to overlook social order and consensus in society. Neither of these macro perspectives focuses on individuals and small groups in society. Symbolic interactionists use a micro lens to focus on how individuals and small groups work together to create and re-create society. In the process, they show how individuals develop a sense of self through socialization. Together, structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interaction give us a more complete view and understanding of how society works.

Key Terms

alienation	micro level of analysis (micro)
back stage	presentation of self
communism	primary groups
conflict theory/conflict perspective	primary socialization
culture	self
dysfunctions	social constructionism
false consciousness	social institutions
front stage	structural functionalism
latent functions	symbolic interaction
macro level of analysis (macro)	theoretical perspective
manifest functions	theory
means of production	true consciousness