

Twelfth Edition

SOCIOLOGY

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CHAPTER

1

The Sociological Perspective

HOW is the sociological perspective a new and exciting way of seeing the world?

WHAT is a global perspective?

WHY is sociology an important tool for your future career?



If you were to randomly ask 100 people in the United States, “Why do couples marry?” it is a safe bet that at least 90 of them would reply, “People marry because they fall in love.” Most of us find it hard to imagine a marriage being happy without love; for the same reason, when people fall in love, we expect them to think about marriage.

But is the decision about whom to marry really just a matter of personal feelings? There is plenty of evidence to show that if love is the key to marriage, Cupid’s arrow is carefully aimed by the society around us.

Society has many “rules” about whom we should and should not marry. In all states but Massachusetts, the law rules out half the population, banning people from marrying someone of the same sex, even if a couple is deeply in love. But there are other rules as well. Sociologists have found that people, especially when they are young, are very likely to marry someone close in age, and people of all ages typically marry others in the same racial category, of similar social class background, with about the same level of education, and with the same degree of physical attractiveness (Chapter 18, “Families,” gives details). People end up making choices about whom to marry, but society narrows the field long before they do (Gardyn, 2002; Zipp, 2002).

When it comes to love, the decisions people make do not simply result from the process philosophers call “free will.” Sociology teaches us that the social world guides all our life choices in much the same way that the seasons influence our clothing and activities.

The Sociological Perspective

Sociology is the systematic study of human society. At the heart of sociology is a special point of view called the *sociological perspective*.

Seeing the General in the Particular

Years ago, Peter Berger (1963) described the **sociological perspective** as *seeing the general in the particular*. By this he meant that sociologists look for general patterns in the behavior of particular people. Although every individual is unique, a society shapes the lives of its members. Here in the United States, for example, people expect to be in love with the person they marry, an idea almost unknown among, say, people living in a traditional village in rural Pakistan.

In addition, any society shapes the lives of people in various *categories* (such as children and adults, women and men, the rich and the poor). In a classic study of women’s hopes for their marriages, for example, Lillian Rubin (1976) found that higher-income women typically expected the men they married to be sensitive to others, to talk readily, and to share feelings and experiences. Lower-income women, she found, had very different expectations and were looking for men who did not drink too much, were not violent, and held steady jobs.

Obviously, what women think they can expect in a marriage partner has a lot to do with social class position. In general, people who come from more privileged social backgrounds tend to be more confident and optimistic about their lives. This is not surprising when we realize that they have more opportunities as well as the training and skills to take advantage of them. We begin to think sociologically by realizing how the society we live in—as well as the general cate-

gories into which we fall within that society—shapes our particular life experiences.



How do you think your social class background shapes the kind of job you expect to have after you graduate? What effect did your background have on your decision to go to college?

Seeing the Strange in the Familiar

At first, using the sociological perspective is *seeing the strange in the familiar*. Imagine a young woman walking up to a young male friend and saying, “You fit all the right social categories, which means you would make a wonderful husband!” We are used to thinking that people fall in love and decide to marry based on personal feelings. But the sociological perspective reveals the initially strange idea that society shapes what we think and do.

Because we live in an individualistic society, learning to see how society affects us may take a bit of practice. If someone asked you why you “chose” to enroll at your particular college, you might offer one of the following reasons:

“I wanted to stay close to home.”

“I got a basketball scholarship.”

“With a journalism degree from this university, I can get a good job.”

“My girlfriend goes to school here.”

“I didn’t get into the school I *really* wanted to attend.”

Any of these responses may well be true. But do they tell the whole story?

Thinking sociologically about going to college, it’s important to realize that only about 5 out of every 100 people in the world earn a college degree. Even in the United States a century ago, going to college was not an option for most people. Today, going to college is

Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the discipline of sociology. The most important skill to gain from this course is the ability to use what we call the *sociological perspective*. This chapter also introduces *sociological theory*, which helps us build understanding from what we see using the sociological perspective.



We can easily see the power of society over the individual by imagining how different our lives would be had we been born in place of any of these children from, respectively, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Thailand, Botswana, South Korea, and El Salvador.

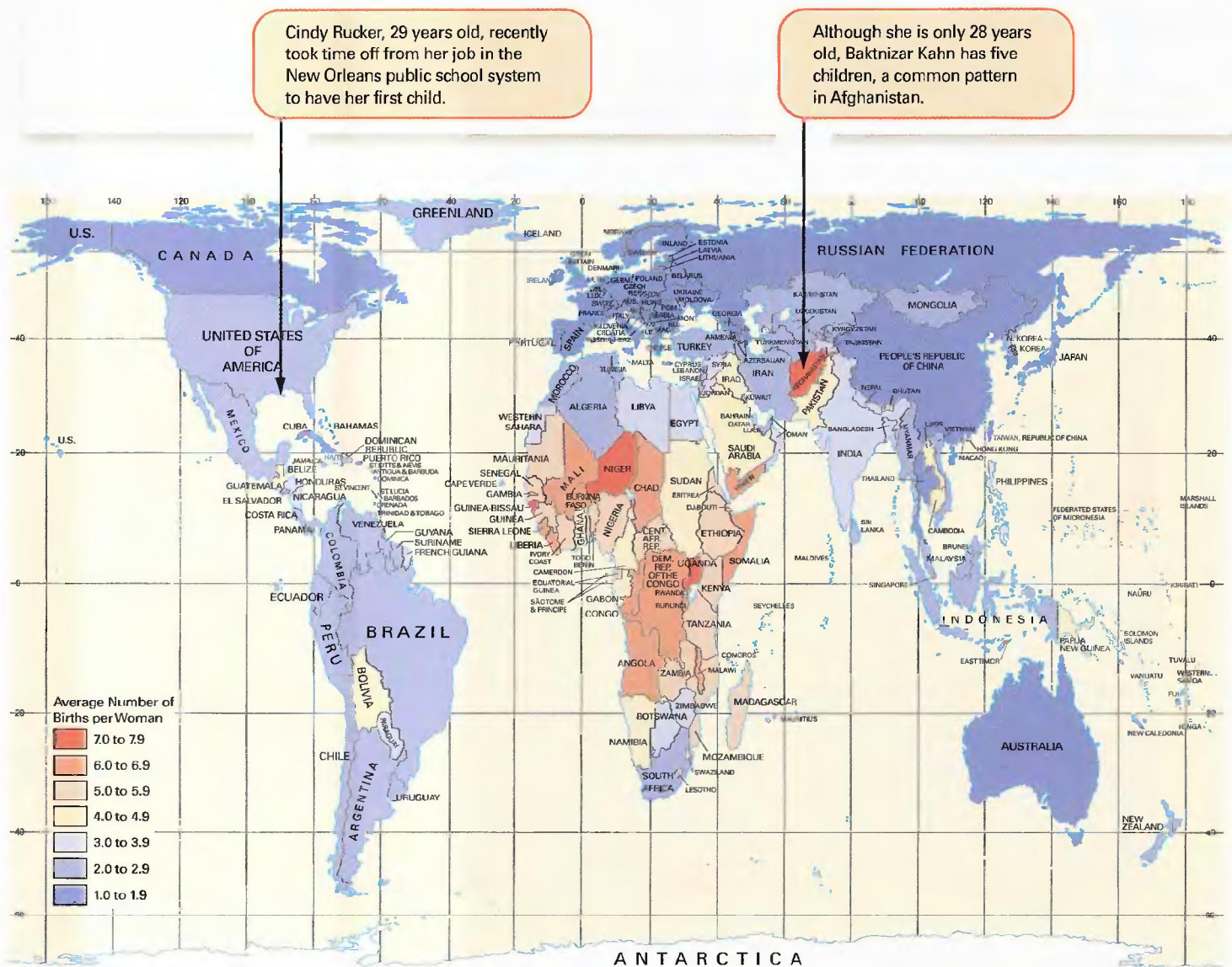
within the reach of far more people. But a look around the classroom shows that social forces still have much to do with who goes to college. For instance, most U.S. college students are young, generally between eighteen and about thirty. Why? Because in our society, attending college is linked to this period of life. But more than age is involved, because fewer than half of all young men and women actually end up on campus.

Another factor is cost. Because higher education is so expensive, college students tend to come from families with above-average incomes. As Chapter 20 (“Education”) explains, if you are lucky enough to belong to a family earning more than \$75,000 a year, you are almost three times as likely to go to college as someone whose family earns less than \$20,000. Is it reasonable, in light of these facts, to say that attending college is simply a matter of personal choice?

Seeing Personal Choice in Social Context

To see how society shapes personal choices, consider the number of children women have. In the United States, as shown in Global Map 1–1 on page 4, the average woman has about two children during her lifetime. In India, however, the average is about three; in Cambodia, about four; in Ethiopia, about five; in Yemen, about six; and in Niger, about seven.

What accounts for these striking differences? As later chapters explain, women in poor countries have less schooling and fewer economic opportunities, are more likely to remain in the home, and are less likely to use contraception. Clearly, society has much to do with the decisions women and men make about childbearing.



Cindy Rucker, 29 years old, recently took time off from her job in the New Orleans public school system to have her first child.

Although she is only 28 years old, Baktnizar Kahn has five children, a common pattern in Afghanistan.

WINDOW ON THE WORLD

GLOBAL MAP 1-1 Women's Childbearing in Global Perspective

Is childbearing simply a matter of personal choice? A look around the world shows that it is not. In general, women living in poor countries have many more children than women in rich nations. Can you point to some of the reasons for this global disparity? In simple terms, such differences mean that if you had been born into another society (whether you are female or male), your life might be quite different from what it is now.

Sources: Data from Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura (2006) and United Nations (2006b). Map projection from *Peters Atlas of the World* (1990).

Another illustration of the power of society to shape even our most private choices comes from the study of suicide. What could be a more personal choice than the decision to end your own life? But Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), one of sociology's pioneers, showed that even here, social forces are at work.

Examining official records in France, his own country, Durkheim found that some categories of people were more likely than others to take their own lives. Men, Protestants, wealthy people, and the unmarried had much higher suicide rates than women, Catholics and Jews, the poor, and married people. Durkheim explained the differences in



tip

Mills used the term “sociological imagination” to mean the same thing as the term “sociological perspective” used by Peter Berger and others.

terms of *social integration*: Categories of people with strong social ties had low suicide rates, and more individualistic categories of people had high suicide rates.

In Durkheim’s time, men had much more freedom than women. But despite its advantages, freedom weakens social ties and thus increases the risk of suicide. Likewise, more individualistic Protestants were more likely to commit suicide than more tradition-bound Catholics and Jews, whose rituals encourage stronger social ties. The wealthy have much more freedom than the poor, but once again, at the cost of a higher suicide rate.

A century later, Durkheim’s analysis still holds true (Thorlindsson & Bjarnason, 1998). Figure 1–1 shows suicide rates for various categories of people in the United States. Keep in mind that suicide is very rare—a rate of 10 suicides for every 100,000 people is about the same as 6 inches in a mile. Even so, we can see some interesting patterns. In 2003, there were 12.1 recorded suicides for every 100,000 white people, more than twice the rate for African Americans (5.1). For both races, suicide was more common among men than among women. White men (19.5) were more than four times as likely as white women (4.7) to take their own lives. Among African Americans, the rate for men (8.8) was about five times higher than for women (1.8). Applying Durkheim’s logic helps us understand why this is the case: The higher suicide rate among white people and men reflects their greater wealth and freedom; the lower rate among women and African Americans reflects their limited social choices. Just as Durkheim did a century ago, we can see general patterns in the personal actions of particular individuals.



Single people are at greater risk of suicide than married people. Can you explain why?

Seeing Sociologically: Marginality and Crisis

Anyone can learn to see the world using the sociological perspective. But two situations help people see clearly how society shapes individual lives: living on the margins of society and living through a social crisis.

From time to time, everyone feels like an “outsider.” For some categories of people, however, being an *outsider*—not part of the dominant group—is an everyday experience. The greater people’s social marginality, the better they are able to use the sociological perspective.

For example, no African American grows up in the United States without understanding the importance of race in shaping people’s

DIVERSITY SNAPSHOT

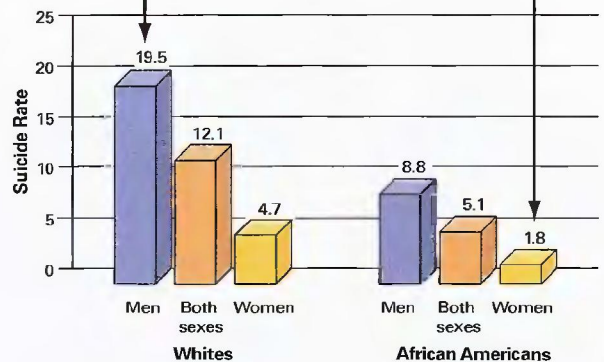


FIGURE 1–1 Rate of Death by Suicide, by Race and Sex, for the United States

Suicide rates are higher for white people than for black people and higher for men than for women. Rates indicate the number of deaths by suicide for every 100,000 people in each category for 2003.

Source: Hoyert et al. (2006).

lives. Rap lyrics by groups such as Three 6 Mafia, who say that they “Done seen people killed, done seen people deal, done seen people live in poverty with no meals,” show that some people of color—especially African Americans living in the inner city—feel like their hopes and dreams are crushed by society. But white people, as the dominant majority, think less often about race and the privileges it provides, believing that race affects only people of color and not themselves as well. People at the margins of social life, including women, gay people, people with disabilities, and the very old, are aware of social patterns that others rarely think about. To become better at using the sociological perspective, we must step back from our familiar routines and look at our lives with a new curiosity.

Periods of change or crisis make everyone feel a little off balance, encouraging us to use the sociological perspective. The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) illustrated this idea using the Great Depression of the 1930s. As the unemployment rate soared to 25 percent, people out of work could not help but see general social forces at work in their particular lives. Rather than saying, “Something is wrong with me; I can’t find a job,” they took a sociological approach and realized, “The economy has collapsed; there are no jobs to be found!” Mills believed that using what he called the “sociological imagination” in this way helps people understand not only their society but also their



tip

The short journal entries that appear in this text are “snapshots” of interesting social patterns I have observed in my world travels. As you read them, think about places you have been and experiences you have had that illustrate the sociological concepts being discussed.



get it right

Think of the global perspective as an extension of the sociological perspective. Here at home, where we are “placed” within society affects how we act, think, and feel. Expanding our vision shows that our nation’s place in the world affects the lives of all who live in this country.



People with the greatest privileges tend to see individuals as responsible for their own lives. Those at the margins of society, by contrast, are quick to see how race, class, and gender can create disadvantages. The rap group Three 6 Mafia has given voice to the frustration felt by many African Americans living in this country’s inner cities.

own lives, because the two are closely related. The Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life box takes a closer look.

Just as social change encourages sociological thinking, sociological thinking can bring about social change. The more we learn about how “the system” operates, the more we may want to change it in some way. Becoming aware of the power of gender, for example, has caused many women and men to try to reduce gender inequality.

The Importance of a Global Perspective



December 10, Fez, Morocco. This medieval city—a web of narrow streets and alleyways—is alive with the laughter of playing children, the silence of veiled women, and the steady gaze of men

leading donkeys loaded with goods. Fez seems to have changed little over the centuries. Here, in northwest Africa, we are just a few hundred miles from the more familiar rhythms of Europe. Yet

this place seems a thousand years away. Never have we had such an adventure! Never have we thought so much about home!

As new information technology draws even the farthest reaches of the Earth closer to one another, many academic disciplines are taking a **global perspective**, *the study of the larger world and our society’s place in it*. What is the importance of a global perspective for sociology?

First, global awareness is a logical extension of the sociological perspective. Sociology shows us that our place in society shapes our life experiences. It stands to reason, then, that the position of our society in the larger world system affects everyone in the United States. The Thinking Globally box on page 8 describes a “global village” to show the social shape of the world and the place of the United States within it.

The world’s 193 nations can be divided into three broad categories according to their level of economic development (see Global Map 12–1 on page 306). **High-income countries** are the *nations with the highest overall standards of living*. The sixty countries in this category include the United States and Canada, Argentina, the nations of Western Europe, South Africa, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Australia. Taken together, these nations produce most of the world’s goods and services, and the people who live there own most of the planet’s wealth. Economically speaking, people in these countries are very well off, not because they are smarter or work harder than anyone else, but because they were lucky enough to be born in a rich region of the world.

A second category is **middle-income countries**, *nations with a standard of living about average for the world as a whole*. People in any of these seventy-six nations—many of the countries of Eastern Europe, some of Africa, and almost all of Latin America and Asia—are as likely to live in rural villages as in cities and to walk or ride tractors, scooters, bicycles, or animals as to drive automobiles. On average, they receive six to eight years of schooling. Most middle-income countries also have considerable social inequality within their own borders, so that some people are extremely rich (members of the business elite in nations across North Africa, for example), but many more lack safe housing and adequate nutrition (people living in the shanty settlements that surround Mexico City or Lima, Peru).

The remaining fifty-seven nations of the world are **low-income countries**, *nations with a low standard of living in which most people are poor*. Most of the poorest countries in the world are in Africa, and a few are in Asia. Here, again, a few people are very rich, but the majority struggle to get by with poor housing, unsafe water, too little food, and perhaps most serious of all, little chance to improve their lives.

Chapter 12 (“Global Stratification”) explains the causes and consequences of global wealth and poverty. But every chapter of this text



tip

Read and think about the four reasons to take a global perspective. The overall point is that understanding global patterns both helps us understand our own lives (as Peter Berger would say) and increases our awareness of global problems (as C. Wright Mills would say).



tip

The box below suggests that C. Wright Mills hoped the sociological imagination would spark social change toward a more equal society.



Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life

The Sociological Imagination: Turning Personal Problems into Public Issues

The power of the sociological perspective lies not just in changing individual lives but in transforming society. As C. Wright Mills saw it, society, not people's personal failings, is the cause of poverty and other social problems. The sociological imagination brings people together to create change by transforming personal *problems* into public *issues*.

In the following excerpt, Mills (1959:3–5) explains the need for a sociological imagination:*

When a society becomes industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar

man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change. . . . The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the society in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kind of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of men and society, of biography and history, of self and world. . . .

What they need . . . is a quality of mind that will help them to [see] what is going on in the world and . . . what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality . . . that . . . may be called the sociological imagination.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. As Mills sees it, how are personal troubles different from public issues?
2. Living in the United States, why do we often blame ourselves for the personal problems we face?
3. By using the sociological imagination, how do we gain power over our world?

*In this excerpt, Mills uses "man" and male pronouns to apply to all people. Note that even an outspoken critic of society such as Mills reflected the conventional writing practices of his time as far as gender was concerned.

makes comparisons between the United States and other nations for four reasons:

1. **Where we live shapes the lives we lead.** As we saw in Global Map 1–1 on page 4, women living in rich and poor countries have very different lives, as suggested by the number of children they have. To understand ourselves and appreciate how others live, we must understand something about how countries differ, which is one good reason to pay attention to the global maps found throughout this text.
2. **Societies throughout the world are increasingly interconnected.** Historically, people in the United States took only passing note of the countries beyond our own borders. In recent decades, however, this country and the rest of the world have become linked as never before. Electronic technology now transmits sounds, pictures, and written documents around the globe in seconds.

One effect of new technology is that people the world over now share many tastes in food, clothing, and music. Rich countries such as the United States influence other nations, whose people are ever more likely to gobble up our Big Macs and Whoppers, dance to the latest hip-hop music, and speak the English language.

But the larger world also has an impact on us. We all know the contributions of famous immigrants such as Arnold Schwarzenegger (who came to the United States from Austria) and Gloria Estefan (who came from Cuba). More than 1 million immigrants enter the United States each year, bringing their skills and talents, along with their fashions and foods, greatly increasing the racial and cultural diversity of this country.

Trade across national boundaries has also created a global economy. Large corporations make and market goods worldwide. Stock traders in New York pay close attention to



tip

The point of this box is to help you to appreciate the huge extent of global social inequality. At the same time, describing the world in terms of a single “village” also suggests that we might consider that living on a single planet, we all share responsibility for how everyone lives.



tip

A global perspective is used in every chapter of this book. One benefit of a global perspective is understanding how high-income countries differ from low-income countries. In addition, studying other societies helps us understand our own way of life a little better.



Thinking Globally

The Global Village: A Social Snapshot of Our World

The Earth is home to 6.6 billion people who live in the cities and villages of 193 nations. To grasp the social shape of the world, imagine shrinking the planet’s population to a “global village” of just 1,000 people. In this village, more than half (610) of the inhabitants are Asian, including 200 citizens of the People’s Republic of China. Next, in terms of numbers, we would find 140 Africans, 110 Europeans, 85 people from Latin America and the Caribbean, 5 from Australia and the South Pacific, and just 50 North Americans, including 45 people from the United States.

A close look at this settlement would reveal some startling facts: The village is a rich place, with a spectacular range of goods and services for sale. Yet most of the villagers can only dream about such treasures, because they are so poor: 80 percent of the

village’s total income is earned by just 200 people.

For most, the greatest problem is getting enough food. Every year, village workers produce more than enough to feed everyone; even so, half the people in the village, including most of the children, do not get enough to eat, and many must go to sleep hungry every night. The worst-off 200 residents (who, together, have less money than the richest person in the village) lack both clean drinking water and safe shelter. Weak and unable to work, their lives are at risk from deadly diseases.

The village has many schools, including a fine university. About 50 inhabitants have completed a college degree, but about one-third of the village’s people are not even able to read or write.

We in the United States, on average, would be among the village’s richest people.

Although we may think that our comfortable lives are the result of our own talent and hard work, the sociological perspective reminds us that our achievements also result from our nation’s privileged position in the worldwide social system.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Do any of the statistics presented in this box surprise you? Which ones? Why?
2. How do you think the lives of poor people in a lower-income country differ from those typical of people in the United States?
3. Is your “choice” to attend college affected by the country in which you live? How?

Sources: Calculations by the author based on data from Population Reference Bureau (2006) and United Nations Development Programme (2006).

the financial markets in Tokyo and Hong Kong even as wheat farmers in Iowa watch the price of grain in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. Because most new U.S. jobs involve international trade, global understanding has never been more important.

3. **Many social problems that we face in the United States are far more serious elsewhere.** Poverty is a serious problem in the United States, but as Chapter 12 (“Global Stratification”) explains, poverty in Latin America, Africa, and Asia is both more common and more serious. In the same way, although women have lower social standing than men in the United States, gender inequality is even greater in the world’s poor countries.
4. **Thinking globally helps us learn more about ourselves.** We cannot walk the streets of a distant city without thinking about what it means to live in the United States. Comparing life in various settings also leads to unexpected lessons. For instance, in Chapter 12, we visit a squatter settlement in Madras, India. There, despite desperate poverty, people thrive in the love and support of family members. Why, then, are so many poor people in our own country angry and alone? Are material things—

so central to our definition of a “rich” life—the best way to measure human well-being?

In sum, in an increasingly interconnected world, we can understand ourselves only to the extent that we understand others. Sociology is an invitation to learn a new way of looking at the world around us. But is this invitation worth accepting? What are the benefits of applying the sociological perspective?



How would your life be different if you had been born into an impoverished family in an Asian farming village? What might you be doing right now instead of reading this textbook?

Applying the Sociological Perspective

Applying the sociological perspective is useful in many ways. First, sociology guides many of the laws and policies that shape our lives. Second, on an individual level, making use of the sociological perspective leads to important personal growth and expanded



student 2 student

"I'm beginning to see that a lot of what I've called 'common sense' is really not true at all."



tip

This discussion shows you that using the sociological perspective is valuable for changing society by shaping public policy, for your personal enrichment, and for advancing your career.

awareness. Third, for anyone, studying sociology is excellent preparation for the world of work. We will look briefly at these different ways of putting sociology to work.

Sociology and Public Policy

Sociologists have helped shape public policy—the laws and regulations that guide how people in communities live and work—in countless ways, from racial desegregation and school busing to laws regulating divorce. For example, in her study of how divorce affects people's income, the sociologist Lenore Weitzman (1985, 1996) discovered that women who leave marriages typically experience a dramatic loss of income. Recognizing this fact, many states passed laws that have increased women's claims to marital property and enforced fathers' obligations to provide support for women raising their children.

Sociology and Personal Growth

By applying the sociological perspective, we are likely to become more active and aware and to think more critically in our daily lives. Using sociology benefits us in four ways:

1. **The sociological perspective helps us assess the truth of "common sense."** We all take many things for granted, but that does not make them true. One good example is the idea that we are free individuals who are personally responsible for our own lives. If we think we decide our own fate, we may be quick to praise very successful people as superior and consider others with fewer achievements personally deficient. A sociological approach, by contrast, encourages us to ask whether such common beliefs are actually true and, to the extent that they are not, why they are so widely held. The Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life box on page 10 gives an example of how the sociological perspective sometimes makes us rethink common-sense ideas about other people.
2. **The sociological perspective helps us see the opportunities and constraints in our lives.** Sociological thinking leads us to see that in the game of life, we have a say in how to play our cards, but it is society that deals us the hand. The more we understand the game, the better players we will be. Sociology helps us "size up" our world so that we can pursue our goals more effectively. "In the *Times*" on page 11 suggests that societal forces play a powerful role in shaping the direction of our lives.
3. **The sociological perspective empowers us to be active participants in our society.** The more we understand how society works, the more active citizens we become. As



One important reason to gain a global understanding is that living in a high-income nation, we can scarcely appreciate the suffering that goes on in much of the world. This family, living in the African nation of Zambia, has none of the security most of us take for granted. In poor nations, children have only a fifty-fifty chance of surviving to adulthood.

C. Wright Mills (1959) explained in the box on page 7, it is the sociological perspective that turns a personal problem (such as being out of work) into a public issue (a lack of good jobs). As we come to see how society affects us, we may support society as it is, or we may set out with others to change it.

4. **The sociological perspective helps us live in a diverse world.** North Americans represent just 5 percent of the world's people, and as the remaining chapters of this book explain, many of the other 95 percent live very differently than we do. Still, like people everywhere, we tend to define our own way of life as "right," "natural," and "better." The sociological perspective encourages us to think critically about the relative strengths and weaknesses of all ways of life, including our own.

Careers: The "Sociology Advantage"

Most students at colleges and universities today are very interested in getting a good job. A background in sociology is excellent preparation for the working world. Of course, completing a bachelor's degree in



tip

Think of ways sociology could be helpful in terms of careers you have imagined for yourself.



tip

"Sociology@Work" icons, found throughout the text, call attention to topics related to work and careers.



Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America

All of us know people who work at low-wage jobs as waitresses at nearby diners, cash register clerks at local drive-throughs, or sales associates at discount stores such as Wal-Mart. We see such people just about every day. Many of us actually *are* such people. In the United States, "common sense" tells us that the jobs people have and the amount of money they make reflect their personal abilities as well as their willingness to work hard.

Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) had her doubts. To find out what the world of low-wage work is really like, the successful journalist and author decided to leave her comfortable middle-class life to live and work in the world of low-wage jobs. She began in Key West, Florida, taking a job as a waitress for \$2.43 an hour plus tips. Right away, she found out that she had to work much harder than she ever imagined. By the end of a shift, she was exhausted, but after sharing tips with the kitchen staff, she averaged less than \$6 an hour. This was barely above the minimum wage and was just enough to pay the rent on her tiny apartment, buy food, and cover other basic expenses. She had to hope that she didn't get sick, because the job did not provide health insurance and she couldn't afford to pay for a visit to a doctor's office.

After working for more than a year at a number of other low-wage jobs, includ-

ing cleaning motels in Maine and working on the floor of a Wal-Mart in Minnesota, she had rejected quite a bit of "common sense." First, she now knew that tens of millions of people with low-wage jobs work very hard every day. If you don't think so, Ehrenreich says, try one of these jobs for yourself. Second, these jobs require not just hard work (imagine thoroughly



cleaning three motel rooms per hour all day long) but special skills and real intelligence (try waiting on ten tables in a restaurant at the same time and keeping everybody happy). She found that the people she worked with were, on average, just as smart, clever, and funny as those she knew who wrote books for a living or taught at a college.



Why, then, do we think of low-wage workers as lazy or as people with less ability? It surprised Ehrenreich to learn that many low-wage workers felt this way about themselves. In a society that teaches us to believe personal ability is everything, we learn to size people up by their jobs. Subject to the constant supervision, random drug tests, and other rigid rules that usually come along with low-wage jobs, Ehrenreich imagined that many people end up feeling unworthy, even to the point of not trying for anything better. Such beliefs, she concludes, help support a society of "extreme inequality," in which some people live better because of the low wages paid to the rest.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Have you ever held a low-wage job? If so, would you say you worked hard? What was your pay? Were there any benefits?
2. Ehrenreich claims that most well-off people in the United States are dependent on low-wage workers. What do you think she means by this?
3. Do you think most people with jobs at Wendy's or Wal-Mart have a real chance to enroll in college and to work toward a different career? Why or why not?

sociology is the right choice for people who decide they would like to go on to graduate work to eventually become a professor or researcher in this field. Throughout the United States, tens of thousands of men and women teach sociology in universities, colleges, and high schools. But just as many professional sociologists work as researchers for government agencies or private foundations and businesses, gathering important information on social behavior and carrying out evaluation research. In today's cost-conscious world, agencies and companies want to be sure that the programs and policies they set in place

get the job done at the lowest cost. Sociologists, especially those with advanced research skills, are in high demand for this kind of work (Deutscher, 1999).

In addition, a smaller but increasing number of professional sociologists work as clinical sociologists. These women and men work, much as clinical psychologists do, with the goal of improving the lives of troubled clients. A basic difference is that sociologists focus on difficulties not in the personality but in the individual's web of social relationships.

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No Degree, and No Way Back to the Middle Class

By **TIMOTHY EGAN**
May 24, 2005

SPOKANE, Wash.—Over the course of his adult life, Jeff Martinelli has married three women and buried one of them, a cancer victim. He had a son and has watched him raise a child of his own. Through it all, one thing was constant: a factory job that was his ticket to the middle class.

It was not until that job disappeared, and he tried to find something—anything—to keep him close to the security of his former life that Mr. Martinelli came to an abrupt realization about the fate of a working man with no college degree in 21st-century America.

He has skills developed operating heavy machinery . . . at Kaiser Aluminum, once one of the best jobs in this city of 200,000. His health is fine. He has no shortage of ambition. But the world has changed for people like Mr. Martinelli.

“For a guy like me, with no college, it’s become pretty bleak out there,” said Mr. Martinelli, who is 50. . . .

His son, Caleb, already knows what it is like out there. Since high school, Caleb has had six jobs, none very promising. Now 28, he may never reach the middle class, he said. But for his father and others of a generation that could count on a comfortable life without a degree, the fall out of the middle class has come as a shock. . . .

They have seen factory gates close and not reopen. They have taken retraining classes for jobs that pay half their old wages. And as they hustle around for work, they have been constantly reminded of the one thing that stands out on their résumés: the education that ended with a high school diploma.

It is not just that the American economy has shed six million manufacturing jobs over the last three decades; it is that the market value of those put out of work . . . has declined considerably over their lifetimes, opening a gap that has left millions of blue-collar workers at the margins of the middle class.

And the changes go beyond the factory floor. Mark McClellan worked his way up from the Kaiser furnaces to management. He did it by taking extra shifts and learning everything he could about the aluminum business.

Still, in 2001, when Kaiser closed, Mr. McClellan discovered that the job market did not value his factory skills nearly as much as it did four years of college. He had the experience, built over a lifetime, but no degree. . . .

He still lives in a grand house in one of the nicest parts of town, and he drives a big white Jeep. But they are a facade.

“I may look middle class,” said Mr. McClellan, who is 45. . . . “But I’m not. My boat is sinking fast.”

By the time these two Kaiser men were forced out of work, a man in his 50’s with a college degree could expect to earn 81 percent more than a man of the same age with just a high school diploma. . . .

Mr. Martinelli refuses to feel sorry for himself. He has a job in pest control now, killing ants and spiders at people’s homes, making barely half the money he made at the Kaiser smelter. . . .

Mr. Martinelli and other former factory workers say that, over time, they have come to fear that the fall out of the middle class could be permanent. Their new lives—the frustrating job interviews, the bills that arrive with red warning letters on the outside—are consequences of a decision made at age 18.

. . . Mr. McClellan was a doctor’s son. . . . He thought about going to college. But when he got on at Kaiser, he felt he had arrived.

At the time, the decision to skip college was not that unusual, even for a child of the middle class. Despite Mr. McClellan’s lack of skills or education beyond the 12th grade, there was good reason to believe that the aluminum factory could get him into middle-class security quicker than a bachelor’s degree could, he said.

By 22, he was a group foreman. By 28, a supervisor. By 32, he was in management. Before his 40th birthday, Mr. McClellan hit his earnings peak, making \$100,000 with bonuses.

“I had a house with a swimming pool, new cars,” he said. “My wife never had to work. I was right in the middle of middle-class America and I knew it and I loved it.” . . .

The job lasted just short of 30 years. Kaiser, debt-ridden after a series of failed management initiatives and a long strike, closed the plant in 2001. . . .

Mr. McClellan has yet to find work, living off his dwindling savings and investments from his years at Kaiser. . . .

“Am I scared just a little bit?” he said. “Yeah, I am.”

He has vowed that his son David will never do the kind of second-guessing that he is. Even at 16, David knows what he wants to do: go to college and study medicine. . . .

He said he would not make the same choice his father did 27 years earlier. . . .

Mr. McClellan agrees. He is firm in one conclusion, having risen from the factory floor only to be knocked down: “There is no working up anymore.”

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. In what ways does the operation of society shape what people experience as their personal successes and failures?
2. Why is having a college degree more important now than ever before to increase your job opportunities?
3. Do you think your decision to attend college makes sense in terms of future earnings?

Adapted from the original article by Timothy Egan published in *The New York Times* on May 24, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted with permission.



tip

This part of the chapter turns the sociological perspective on sociology itself. Just as the sociological perspective shows us that many of our personal experiences are products of the way society operates, so we see that the development of sociology itself resulted from major changes in society.

But sociology is not just for people who want to be sociologists. People who work in criminal justice—including jobs in police departments, probation offices, and corrections facilities—gain the “sociology advantage” by learning which categories of people are most at risk of becoming criminals as well as victims, how effective

SOCIOLOGY WORK

various policies and programs are at preventing crime, and why people turn to crime in the first place. Similarly, people who work in health care—including doctors, nurses, and technicians—also gain a “sociology advantage” by learning about patterns of health and illness within the population, as well as how factors such as race, gender, and social class affect human health.

The American Sociological Association (2002) reports that sociology is also excellent preparation for jobs in dozens of additional fields, including advertising, banking, business, education, government, journalism, law, public relations, and social work. In almost any type of work, success depends on understanding how various categories of people differ in beliefs, family patterns, and other ways of life. Unless you plan to have a job that never involves dealing with people, you should consider the workplace benefits of learning more about sociology.



Write down five jobs that appeal to you. Then identify ways in which sociological thinking would increase your chances for success in each one.

The Origins of Sociology

Like the “choices” made by individuals, major historical events rarely just “happen.” The birth of sociology was itself the result of powerful social forces.

Social Change and Sociology

Striking changes took place in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Three kinds of change were especially important in the development of sociology: the rise of a factory-based industrial economy, the explosive growth of cities, and new ideas about democracy and political rights.

A New Industrial Economy

During the Middle Ages in Europe, most people plowed fields near their homes or worked in small-scale *manufacturing* (a word derived from Latin words meaning “to make by hand”). By the end of the eighteenth century, inventors used new sources of energy—the power of moving water and then steam—to operate large machines in mills

and factories. Instead of laboring at home, workers became part of a large and anonymous labor force, under the control of strangers who owned the factories. This change in the system of production took people out of their homes, weakening the traditions that had guided community life for centuries.

The Growth of Cities

Across Europe, landowners took part in what historians call the *enclosure movement*—they fenced off more and more farmland to create grazing areas for sheep, the source of wool for the thriving textile mills. Without land, countless tenant farmers had little choice but to head to the cities in search of work in the new factories.

As cities grew larger, these urban migrants faced many social problems, including pollution, crime, and homelessness. Moving through streets crowded with strangers, they found a new, impersonal social world.

Political Change

People in the Middle Ages viewed society as an expression of God’s will: From the royalty to the serfs, each person up and down the social ladder played a part in the holy plan. This theological view of society is captured in lines from the old Anglican hymn “All Things Bright and Beautiful”:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly
And ordered their estate.

But as cities grew, tradition came under spirited attack. In the writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), and Adam Smith (1723–1790), we see a shift in focus from a moral obligation to God and king to the pursuit of self-interest. In the new political climate, philosophers spoke of *personal liberty* and *individual rights*. Echoing these sentiments, our own Declaration of Independence states that every person has “certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The French Revolution, which began in 1789, was an even greater break with political and social tradition. The French social analyst Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) thought the changes in society brought about by the French Revolution were so great that they amounted to “nothing short of the regeneration of the whole human race” (1955:13, orig. 1856).

A New Awareness of Society

Huge factories, exploding cities, a new spirit of individualism—these changes combined to make people aware of their surroundings. The



tip

Auguste Comte believed that human knowledge developed in three general stages. First was the theological stage (Europe during the Middle Ages when the church dominated people's thinking about society); then came the metaphysical stage (the Enlightenment, including the philosophy of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau); finally, the scientific stage began with physics and chemistry and then sociology.



tip

Chapter 2 ("Sociological Investigation") explains that science is only one of several ways to carry out sociological research.

new discipline of sociology was born in England, France, and Germany—precisely where the changes were greatest.

Science and Sociology

And so it was that the French social thinker Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the term *sociology* in 1838 to describe a new way of looking at society. This makes sociology one of the youngest academic disciplines—far newer than history, physics, or economics, for example.

Of course, Comte was not the first person to think about the nature of society. Such questions fascinated the brilliant thinkers of ancient civilizations, including the Chinese philosopher K'ung Fu-tzu, or Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), and the Greek philosophers Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.).¹ Centuries later, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180), the medieval thinkers Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) and Christine de Pisan (c. 1363–1431), and the English playwright William Shakespeare (1564–1616) wrote about the workings of society.

Yet these thinkers were more interested in imagining the ideal society than in studying society as it really was. Comte and other pioneers of sociology all cared about how society could be improved, but their major goal was to understand how society actually operates.

Comte (1798, orig. 1851–54) saw sociology as the product of a three-stage historical development. During the earliest, the *theological stage*, from the beginning of human history to the end of the European Middle Ages about 1350 C.E., people took a religious view that society expressed God's will.

With the dawn of the Renaissance in the fifteenth century, the theological approach gave way to a *metaphysical stage* of history in which people saw society as a natural rather than a supernatural system. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), for example, suggested that society reflected not the perfection of God so much as the failings of a selfish human nature.

What Comte called the *scientific stage* of history began with the work of early scientists such as the Polish astronomer Copernicus (1473–1543), the Italian astronomer and physicist Galileo (1564–1642), and the English physicist and mathematician Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Comte's contribution came in applying the scientific



Here we see Galileo, one of the great pioneers of the scientific revolution, defending himself before church officials, who were greatly threatened by his claims that science could explain the operation of the universe. Just as Galileo challenged the common sense of his day, pioneering sociologists such as Auguste Comte later argued that society is neither rigidly fixed by God's will nor set by human nature. On the contrary, Comte claimed, society is a system we can study scientifically, and based on what we learn, we can act intentionally to improve our lives.

North Wind Picture Archives

approach—first used to study the physical world—to the study of society.²

Comte's approach is called **positivism**, a way of understanding based on science. As a positivist, Comte believed that society operates according to its own laws, much as the physical world operates according to gravity and other laws of nature.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, sociology had spread to the United States and showed the influence of Comte's ideas. Today, most sociologists still consider science a crucial part of sociology. But as Chapter 2 ("Sociological Investigation") explains, we now realize that human behavior is far more complex than the movement of planets or even the actions of other living things. We are creatures of imagination and spontaneity, so human behavior can never fully be explained by rigid "laws of society." In addition, early sociologists such

¹The abbreviation B.C.E. means "before the common era." We use this throughout the text instead of the traditional B.C. ("before Christ") to reflect the religious diversity of our society. Similarly, in place of the traditional A.D. (*anno Domini*, or "in the year of our Lord"), we use the abbreviation C.E. ("common era").

²Illustrating Comte's stages, the ancient Greeks and Romans viewed the planets as gods; Renaissance metaphysical thinkers saw them as astral influences (giving rise to astrology); by the time of Galileo, scientists understood planets as natural objects moving according to natural laws.



student²student

“I found it helpful to learn the three theoretical approaches right away in Chapter 1 because we came back to them in almost every chapter after that.”

In the Plains and Mountain regions of the country, where population density is very low, people are more isolated and have a higher rate of suicide.

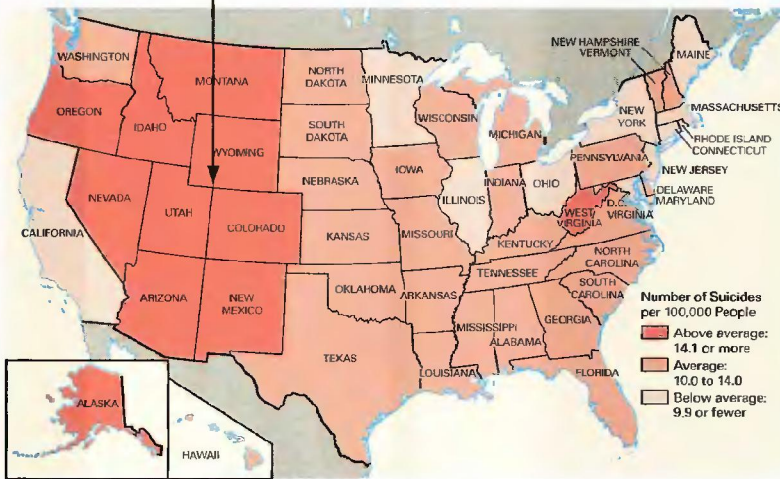
SEEING OURSELVES

NATIONAL MAP 1-1

Suicide Rates across the United States

This map shows which states have high, average, and low suicide rates. Look for patterns. By and large, high suicide rates occur where people live far apart from one another. More densely populated states have low suicide rates. Do these data support or contradict Durkheim’s theory of suicide? Why?

Source: Hoyert et al. (2006).



as Karl Marx (1818–1883), whose ideas are discussed in Chapter 4 (“Society”), were troubled by the striking inequality of industrial society. They wanted the new discipline of sociology not just to understand society but to bring about change toward social justice.

Sociological Theory

Weaving observations into understanding brings us to another aspect of sociology: theory. A **theory** is a *statement of how and why specific facts are related*. The job of sociological theory is to explain social behavior in the real world. For example, recall Emile Durkheim’s theory that categories of people with low social integration (men, Protestants, and the wealthy, and the unmarried) are at higher risk of suicide.

As the next chapter (“Sociological Investigation”) explains, sociologists test their theories by gathering evidence using various research methods. Durkheim did exactly this, finding out which categories of people were more likely to commit suicide and which were less likely and then devising a theory that best squared with all available evidence. National Map 1-1 displays the suicide rate for each of the fifty states.

In building theory, sociologists face two fundamental questions: What issues should we study? And how should we connect the facts? In the process of answering these questions, sociologists look to one or more theoretical approaches as “road maps.” Think of a **theoretical approach** as a *basic image of society that guides thinking and research*. Sociologists make use of three major theoretical approaches: the

structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approach, and the symbolic-interaction approach, each of which will be explored in the remainder of this chapter.

The Structural-Functional Approach

The **structural-functional approach** is a *framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability*. As its name suggests, this approach points to **social structure**, any relatively stable pattern of social behavior. Social structure gives our lives shape—in families, the workplace, the classroom, and the community. This approach also looks for a structure’s **social functions**, the *consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole*. All social structure, from a simple handshake to complex religious rituals, functions to keep society going, at least in its present form.

The structural-functional approach owes much to Auguste Comte, who pointed out the need to keep society unified at a time when many traditions were breaking down. Emile Durkheim, who helped establish the study of sociology in French universities, also based his work on this approach. A third structural-functional pioneer was the English sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). Spencer compared society to the human body. Just as the structural parts of the human body—the skeleton, muscles, and various internal organs—function interdependently to help the entire organism survive, social structures work together to preserve society. The structural-functional approach, then, leads sociologists to identify various structures of society and investigate their functions.



tip

A “Critical Review” section follows discussion of each theoretical approach. Be sure to read each one carefully and answer the “✓ Your Learning” question.

✓ get it right

Like the structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approach is concerned with the “functions” or consequences of social patterns. But structural-functional theory looks at the functions of a social pattern for *all* of society; social-conflict theory looks at how a social pattern advantages some categories of people and at the same time harms others.

Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) expanded our understanding of the concept of social function by pointing out that any social structure probably has many functions, some more obvious than others. He distinguished between **manifest functions**, *the recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern*, and **latent functions**, *the unrecognized and unintended consequences of any social pattern*. For example, the manifest function of the U.S. system of higher education is to provide young people with the information and skills they need to perform jobs after graduation. Perhaps just as important, although less often acknowledged, is college’s latent function as a “marriage broker,” bringing together people of similar social backgrounds. Another latent function of higher education is to limit unemployment by keeping millions of young people out of the labor market, where many of them may not easily find jobs.

But Merton also recognized that the effects of social structure are not all good, and certainly not good for everybody. Thus a **social dysfunction** is *any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society*. People often disagree about what is helpful and what is harmful to society as a whole. In addition, what is functional for one category of people (say, high profits for factory owners) may well be dysfunctional for another category of people (say, low wages for factory workers).

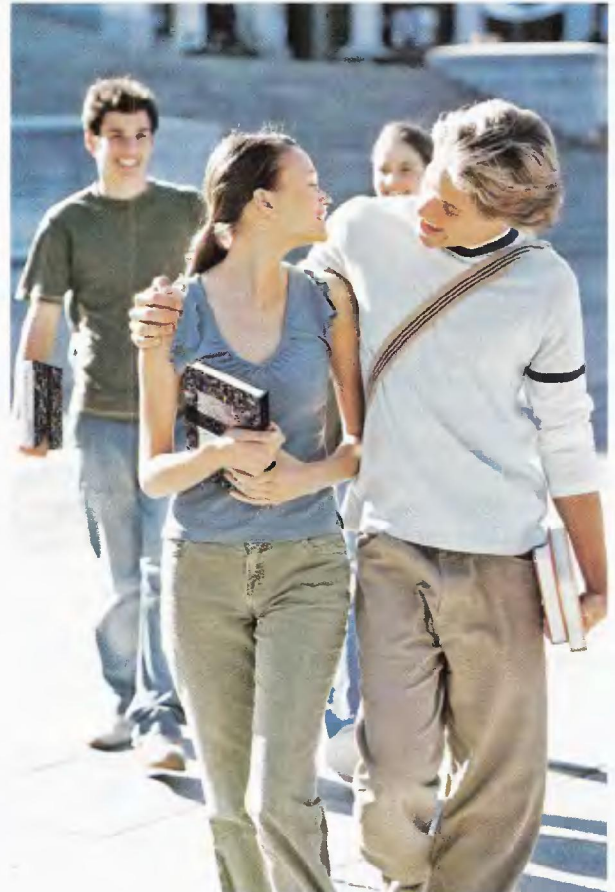
CRITICAL REVIEW The main idea of the structural-functional approach is its vision of society as stable and orderly. The main goal of the sociologists who use this approach, then, is to figure out “what makes society tick.”

In the mid-1900s, most sociologists favored the structural-functional approach. In recent decades, however, its influence has declined. By focusing on social stability and unity, critics point out, structural-functionalism ignores inequalities of social class, race, and gender, which cause tension and conflict. In general, its focus on stability at the expense of conflict makes this approach somewhat conservative. As a critical response, sociologists developed the social-conflict approach.

✓ YOUR LEARNING How do manifest functions differ from latent functions? Give an example of a manifest function and a latent function of automobiles in the United States.

The Social-Conflict Approach

The **social-conflict approach** is *a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change*. Unlike the structural-functional emphasis on solidarity and stability, this approach highlights inequality and change. Guided by this approach, sociologists investigate how factors such as social class, race,



Applying the structural-functional approach, we look at the functions of various patterns in social life. From this point of view, higher education not only conveys important knowledge and skills to young people but also provides an opportunity for them to gain experience in personal relationships.

ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and age are linked to a society’s unequal distribution of money, power, education, and social prestige. A conflict analysis rejects the idea that social structure promotes the operation of society as a whole, focusing instead on how social patterns benefit some people while hurting others.

Sociologists using the social-conflict approach look at ongoing conflict between dominant and disadvantaged categories of people—the rich in relation to the poor, white people in relation to people of color, and men in relation to women. Typically, people on top try to protect their privileges while the disadvantaged try to gain more for themselves.



tip

Pay attention to the photographs in this text. Besides being fun to look at, they illustrate key ideas. The captions can help you make sense of the images.



get it right

The feminist and gender-conflict approaches and the race-conflict approach are all examples of social-conflict theory.

A conflict analysis of our educational system shows how schooling carries class inequality from one generation to the next. For example, secondary schools assign students to either college preparatory or vocational training programs. From a structural-functional point of view, such “tracking” benefits everyone by providing schooling that fits students’ abilities. But conflict analysis argues that tracking often has less to do with talent than with social background, so that well-to-do students are placed in higher tracks while poor children end up in the lower tracks.

In this way, young people from privileged families get the best schooling, which leads them to college and, later, to high-income careers. The children of poor families, by contrast, are not prepared for college and, like their parents before them, typically get stuck in low-paying jobs. In both cases, the social standing of one generation is passed on to the next, with schools justifying the practice in terms of individual merit (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1982, 1985).

Many sociologists use the social-conflict approach not just to understand society but to bring about societal change that would reduce inequality. Karl Marx, whose ideas are discussed at length in Chapter 4 (“Society”), championed the cause of the workers in what he saw as their battle against factory owners. In a well-known statement (inscribed on his monument in London’s Highgate Cemetery),

Marx asserted, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”

Feminism and the Gender-Conflict Approach

One important type of conflict analysis is the **gender-conflict approach**, a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between women and men. The gender-conflict approach is closely linked to **feminism**, support of social equality for women and men.

The importance of the gender-conflict approach lies in making us aware of the many ways in which our way of life places men in positions of power over women: in the home (where men are usually considered the “head of household”), in the workplace (where men earn more income and hold most positions of power), and in the mass media (how many hip-hop stars are women?).

Another contribution of the gender-conflict approach is making us aware of the importance of women to the development of sociology. Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) is regarded as the first woman sociologist. Martineau, who was born to a wealthy English family, made her mark in 1853 by translating the writings of Auguste Comte from French into English. In her own published writings, she documented the evils of slavery and argued for laws to protect factory workers, defending workers’ right to unionize. She was particularly concerned about the position of women in society and fought for changes in education policy so that women could look forward to more in life than marriage and raising children.

In the United States, Jane Addams (1860–1935) was a sociological pioneer whose contributions began in 1889 when she helped found Hull House, a Chicago settlement house that provided assistance to immigrant families. Although widely published (she wrote eleven books and hundreds of articles), Addams chose the life of a public activist over that of a university sociologist, speaking out on issues involving immigration and the pursuit of peace. Despite the controversy caused by her pacifism during World War I, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

All chapters of this book consider the importance of gender and gender inequality. For an in-depth look at feminism and the social standing of women and men, see Chapter 13 (“Gender Stratification”).

The Race-Conflict Approach

Another important type of social-conflict analysis is the **race-conflict approach**, a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between people of different racial and ethnic categories. Just as men have power over women, white people have numerous social



The social-conflict approach points out patterns of inequality. In general, students are relatively privileged women and men who routinely come into contact with other people who have far fewer opportunities for success. What patterns of social inequality do you see in your everyday life?



tip

A good way to think of a macro-level approach is to imagine yourself using a telescope to look at society from an airplane; you would notice broad patterns, such as whether most people make a living from agriculture, in factories, or in offices. A micro-level approach is more like placing society under a microscope to study in detail how individual people interact in a specific situation.



tip

Harriet Martineau is considered the first woman sociologist.

advantages over people of color, including, on average, higher incomes, more schooling, better health, and longer life.

The race-conflict approach also points out the contributions made by people of color to the development of sociology. Ida Wells Barnett (1862–1931) was born to slave parents but rose to become a teacher and then a journalist and newspaper publisher. She campaigned tirelessly for racial equality and, especially, to put an end to the lynching of black people. She wrote and lectured about racial inequality throughout her life (Lengerman & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998).

An important contribution to understanding race in the United States was made by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963). Born to a poor Massachusetts family, Du Bois enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and then at Harvard University, where he earned the first doctorate awarded by that university to a person of color. Like most people who follow the social-conflict approach (whether focusing on class, gender, or race), Du Bois believed that sociologists should try to solve society’s problems. He therefore studied the black community (1967, orig. 1899), spoke out against racial inequality, and served as a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, & Gender box on page 18 takes a closer look at the ideas of W. E. B. Du Bois.



We can use the sociological perspective to look at sociology itself. All of the most widely recognized pioneers of the discipline were men. This is because in the nineteenth century, it was all but unheard of for women to be college professors, and few women took a central role in public life. But Harriet Martineau in England, Jane Addams in the United States, and others made contributions to sociology that we now recognize as important and lasting.

CRITICAL REVIEW The various social-conflict approaches have gained a large following in recent decades, but like other approaches, they have met with criticism. Because any conflict analysis focuses on inequality, it largely ignores how shared values and interdependence unify members of a society. In addition, say critics, to the extent that the conflict approaches pursue political goals, they cannot claim scientific objectivity. Supporters of social-conflict approaches respond that *all* theoretical approaches have political consequences.

A final criticism of both the structural-functional and the social-conflict approaches is that they paint society in broad strokes—in terms of “family,” “social class,” “race,” and so on. A third theoretical approach views society less in general terms and more as the everyday experiences of individual people.

YOUR LEARNING Why do sociologists characterize the social-conflict approach as “activist”? What is it trying to achieve?

ways help people move from place to place or how housing differs from rich to poor neighborhoods. Sociology also uses a **micro-level orientation**, a *close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations*. Exploring urban life in this way occurs at street level, where you might watch how children invent games on a school playground or how pedestrians respond to homeless people they pass on the street. The **symbolic-interaction approach**, then, is a *framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals*.

How does “society” result from the ongoing experiences of tens of millions of people? One answer, explained in Chapter 6 (“Social Interaction in Everyday Life”), is that society is nothing more than the shared reality that people construct as they interact with one another. That is, human beings live in a world of symbols, attaching *meaning* to virtually everything, from the words on this page to the wink of an eye. “Reality,” therefore, is simply how we define our surroundings, our obligations toward others, and even our own identities.

The symbolic-interaction approach has roots in the thinking of Max Weber (1864–1920), a German sociologist who emphasized the need to understand a setting from the point of view of the people in it. Weber’s approach is discussed in detail in Chapter 4 (“Society”).

Since Weber’s time, sociologists have taken micro-level sociology in a number of different directions. Chapter 5 (“Socialization”)

The Symbolic-Interaction Approach

The structural-functional and social-conflict approaches share a **macro-level orientation**, a *broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole*. Macro-level sociology takes in the big picture, rather like observing a city from high above in a helicopter and seeing how high-



tip

W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the first persons of color to earn a doctorate in sociology and the first to earn this degree from Harvard University.



Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, & Gender

An Important Pioneer: Du Bois on Race

One of sociology's pioneers in the United States, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, did not see sociology as a dry, academic discipline. Rather, he thought of it as the key to solving society's problems, especially racial inequality.

Du Bois spoke out against racial separation and was a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He helped his colleagues in sociology—and people everywhere—see the deep racial divisions in the United States. White people can simply be “Americans,” Du Bois pointed out; African Americans, however, have a “double consciousness,” reflecting their status as people who are never able to escape identification based on the color of their skin.

In his sociological classic *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, published in 1899, Du Bois explored Philadelphia's African American community, identifying both the strengths and the weaknesses of people who were dealing with overwhelming social problems on a day-to-day basis. He

challenged the belief—widespread at that time—that blacks were inferior to whites, and he blamed white prejudice for creating the problems that African Americans faced. He also criticized successful people of color for being so eager to win white acceptance that



they gave up all ties with the black community, which needed their help.

Du Bois described race as the major problem facing the United States in the twentieth century. Early in his career, he was hopeful about overcoming racial divisions. By the end of his life, however, he had grown bitter, believing that little had changed. At the age of ninety-three, Du Bois left the United States for Ghana, where he died two years later.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. If he were alive today, what do you think Du Bois would say about racial inequality in the twenty-first century?
2. How much do you think African Americans today experience a “double consciousness”?
3. In what ways can sociology help us understand and reduce racial conflict?

Sources: Based in part on Baltzell (1967) and Du Bois (1967, orig. 1899).

discusses the ideas of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who explored how our personalities develop as a result of social experience. Chapter 6 (“Social Interaction in Everyday Life”) presents the work of Erving Goffman (1922–1982), whose *dramaturgical analysis* describes how we resemble actors on a stage as we play out our various roles. Other contemporary sociologists, including George Homans and Peter Blau, have developed *social-exchange analysis*. In their view, social interaction is guided by what each person stands to gain or lose from the interaction. In the ritual of courtship, for example, people seek mates who offer at least as much—in terms of physical attractiveness, intelligence, and wealth—as they offer in return.

CRITICAL REVIEW Without denying the existence of macro-level social structures such as the family and social class, the symbolic-interaction approach reminds us that society basically amounts

to *people interacting*. That is, micro-level sociology tries to show how individuals actually experience society. But on the other side of the coin, by focusing on what is unique in each social scene, this approach risks overlooking the widespread influence of culture, as well as factors such as class, gender, and race.

✓ **YOUR LEARNING** How does a micro-level analysis differ from a macro-level analysis? Provide an explanation of a social pattern at both levels.

The Applying Theory table summarizes the main characteristics of the structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approach, and the symbolic-interaction approach. Each approach is helpful in answering particular kinds of questions about society. However, the fullest understanding of our social world comes from using all three, as you can see in the following analysis of sports in the United States.

✓ get it right

The Applying Theory table summarizes the three major theoretical approaches in sociology. Study the table to be sure you understand each one.



student 2 student

“A good way to think of the structural-functional approach is that it tries to figure out ‘what is.’ The social-conflict approach tries to show how unequal society is and says we should reduce inequality.”

APPLYING THEORY

Major Theoretical Approaches

	Structural-Functional Approach	Social-Conflict Approach	Symbolic-Interaction Approach
What is the level of analysis?	Macro-level	Macro-level	Micro-level
What image of society does the approach have?	Society is a system of interrelated parts that is relatively stable. Each part works to keep society operating in an orderly way. Members generally agree about what is morally right and morally wrong.	Society is a system of social inequalities based on class (Marx), gender (feminism and gender-conflict approach), and race (race-conflict approach). Society operates to benefit some categories of people and harm others. Social inequality causes conflict that leads to social change.	Society is an ongoing process. People interact in countless settings using symbolic communications. The reality people experience is variable and changing.
What core questions does the approach ask?	How is society held together? What are the major parts of society? How are these parts linked? What does each part do to help society work?	How does society divide a population? How do advantaged people protect their privileges? How do disadvantaged people challenge the system seeking change?	How do people experience society? How do people shape the reality they experience? How do behavior and meaning change from person to person and from one situation to another?

Applying the Approaches: The Sociology of Sports

Who among us doesn't enjoy sports? Children as young as six or seven may play as many as two or three organized sports at a time. For adults, weekend television is filled with sporting events, and whole sections of our newspapers are devoted to reporting the scores. In the United States, top players such as Mark McGwire (baseball), Tiger Woods (golf), and Serena Williams (tennis) are among our most famous celebrities. Sports in the United States are also a multibillion-dollar industry. What sociological insights can the three theoretical approaches give us into this familiar part of everyday life?

The Functions of Sports

A structural-functional approach directs our attention to the ways in which sports help society operate. The manifest functions of sports include providing recreation as well as offering a means of getting in physical shape and a relatively harmless way to let off steam. Sports have important latent functions as well, from building social relationships to creating tens of thousands of jobs across the country. Sports encourage competition and the pursuit of success, both of which are values that are central to our society's way of life.

Sports also have dysfunctional consequences. For example, colleges and universities that try to field winning teams sometimes recruit students for their athletic skill rather than their academic ability. This



tip

Figures are useful because they contain a lot of information in a small space. In Figure 1–2, look first at the title to see what the figure shows. Then read the caption, which should summarize a pattern. Then look at the individual cases (in this figure, athletic positions) to see the pattern for yourself.

DIVERSITY SNAPSHOT

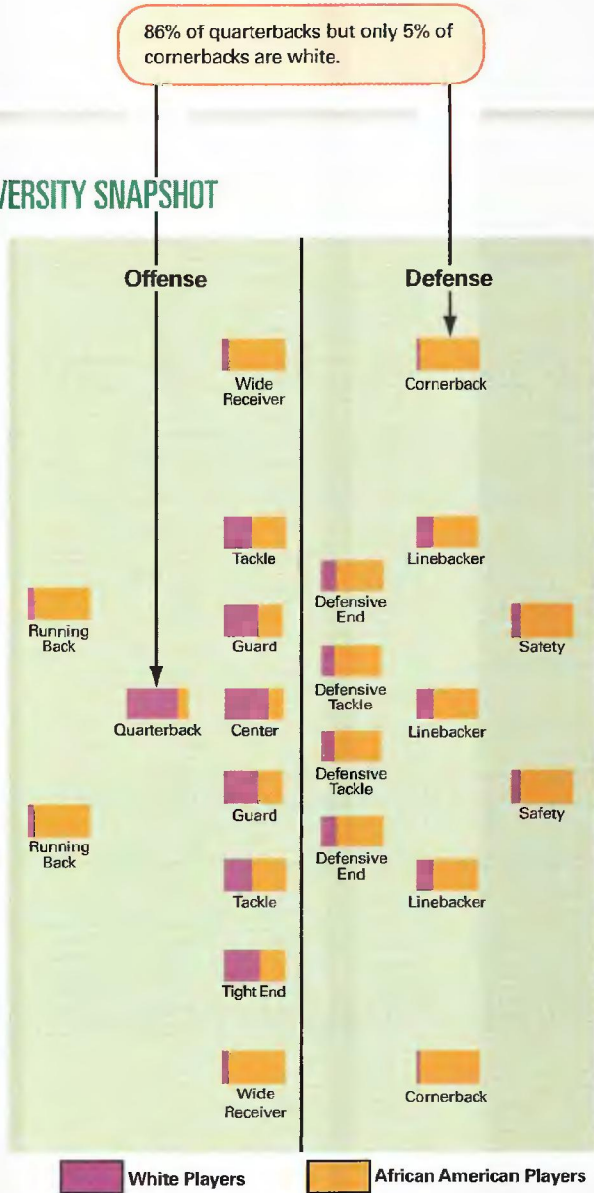


FIGURE 1–2 “Stacking” in Professional Football

Does race play a part in professional sports? Looking at the various positions in professional football, we see that white players are more likely to play the central and offensive positions. What do you make of this pattern?
Source: Lapchick (2006).

Sports and Conflict

A social-conflict analysis of sports begins by pointing out that the games people play reflect their social standing. Some sports—including tennis, swimming, golf, sailing, and skiing—are expensive, so taking part is largely limited to the well-to-do. Football, baseball, and basketball, however, are accessible to people of almost all income levels.

Throughout history, sports have been oriented mostly toward males. For example, the first modern Olympic Games, held in 1896, barred women from competition; in the United States, Little League teams in most parts of the country have only recently let girls play. Traditional ideas that girls and women lack the strength to play sports have now been widely rejected. But our society still encourages men to become athletes while expecting women to be attentive observers and cheerleaders. At the professional level, women also take a back seat to men, particularly in the sports with the most earnings and social prestige.

For decades, big league sports excluded people of color, who were forced to form leagues of their own. Only in 1947 did Major League Baseball admit the first African American player when Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. More than fifty years later, professional baseball honored Robinson’s amazing career by retiring his number 42 on *all* of the teams in the league. In 2005, African Americans (12 percent of the U.S. population) accounted for 9 percent of Major League Baseball players, 66 percent of National Football League (NFL) players, and 73 percent of National Basketball Association (NBA) players (Lapchick, 2006).

One reason for the increasing number of African Americans in professional sports is that athletic performance—in terms of batting average or number of points scored per game—can be precisely measured and is not influenced by racial prejudice. It is also true that some people of color make a particular effort to excel in athletics, where they see greater opportunity than in other careers (S. Steele, 1990; Hoberman, 1997, 1998; Edwards, 2000; Harrison, 2000). In recent years, in fact, African American athletes have earned higher salaries, on average, than white players.

But racial discrimination still exists in professional sports. For one thing, race is linked to the *positions* athletes play on the field, in a pattern called “stacking.” Figure 1–2 shows the results of a study of race in football. Notice that white athletes are much more likely than African American athletes to play offense and to take the central positions on both sides of the line. More broadly, African Americans have a large share of players in only five sports: baseball, basketball, football, boxing, and track. In all professional sports, the vast majority of managers, head coaches, and owners of sports teams are white (Lapchick, 2006).

practice not only lowers the academic standards of a school but also shortchanges athletes who spend little time doing the academic work that will prepare them for later careers (Upthegrove, Roscigno, & Charles, 1999).

✓ get it right

Read this box carefully to understand how sociology's generalizations about social life differ from everyday stereotypes.



Controversy & Debate

Is Sociology Nothing More than Stereotypes?

JENA: (*raising her eyes from her notebook*) Today in sociology class, we talked about stereotypes.

MARCIA: (*trying to focus on her science lab*) OK, here's one: Roommates don't like to be disturbed when they're studying.

JENA: Seriously, my studious friend, we all have stereotypes, even professors.

MARCIA: (*becoming faintly interested*) Like what?

JENA: Professor Chandler said today in class that Protestants are the people who kill themselves. And then Yannina—this girl from, I think, Ecuador—says something like, “You Americans are rich, you marry, and you love to divorce!”

MARCIA: My brother said to me last week that “Everybody knows you have to be black to play professional basketball.” Now there's a stereotype!

College students, like everyone else, are quick to make generalizations about people. And as this chapter has explained, sociologists, too, love to generalize by looking for social patterns. However, beginning students of sociology may wonder if generalizations aren't really the same thing as stereotypes. For example, are the statements reported by Jena and Marcia true generalizations or false stereotypes?

Let's first be clear that a **stereotype** is a *simplified description applied to every person in some category*. Each of the statements made at the beginning of this box is a stereotype that is false for three reasons. First, rather than describing averages, each statement describes every person in some category in exactly the same way; second, even though many stereotypes often contain an element of truth, each statement ignores facts and distorts reality; and third, each statement seems to be motivated by bias, sounding more like a “put-down” than a fair-minded observation.

What about sociology? If our discipline looks for social patterns and makes generalizations, does it express stereotypes? The answer is no, for three reasons. First, *sociologists do not carelessly apply any generalization to everyone in a category*. Second, *sociologists make sure that a generalization squares with the available facts*. And third, *sociologists offer generalizations fair-mindedly, with an interest in getting at the truth*.

Jena remembered her professor saying (although not in quite the same words) that the suicide rate among Protestants is higher than among Catholics or Jews. Based on information presented earlier in this chapter, that is a true statement. However, the way Jena incorrectly reported the classroom remark—“Protestants are the ones who kill themselves”—is not good sociology. It is not a true generalization because the vast majority of Protestants do no such thing. It would be just as wrong to jump to the conclusion that a particular friend, because he is a Protestant male, is about to end his own life.

(Imagine refusing to lend money to a roommate who happens to be a Baptist, explaining, “Well, given the way people like you commit suicide, I might never get paid back!”)

Second, sociologists shape their generalizations to the available facts. A more factual version of the statement Yannina made in class is that on average, the U.S. population does have a high standard of living, almost everyone in our society does marry at some point in their lives, and although few people take pleasure in divorcing, our divorce rate is also among the world's highest.

Third, sociologists try to be fair-minded and want to get at the truth. The third statement made by Marcia's brother, about African Americans and basketball, is an unfair stereotype rather than good sociology for two reasons. First, it is simply not true, and second, it seems motivated by bias rather than truth-seeking.

The bottom line is that good sociological generalizations are *not* the same as harmful stereotyping. A college sociology course is an excellent setting for getting at the truth

behind common stereotypes. The classroom encourages discussion and offers the factual information you need to decide whether a particular statement is a valid sociological generalization or just a stereotype.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Can you think of a common stereotype of sociologists? What is it? After reading this box, do you still think it is valid?
2. Do you think taking a sociology course can help correct people's stereotypes? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of a stereotype of your own that might be challenged by sociological analysis?



A sociology classroom is a great place to get at the truth behind common stereotypes.

✓ get it right

Both the structural-functional and social-conflict approaches take a broad, or macro-level, view of sports. The symbolic-interaction approach views sports at a micro-level, more the way a particular individual might experience it.



tip

The Applying Sociology in Everyday Life items provide additional ways for you to connect the ideas found in this chapter with your own life.



As the television show *Friday Night Lights* makes clear, sports are an important element of social life in countless communities across the United States. Sociology's three theoretical approaches all contribute to our understanding of the role of sports in society.

Although many individual players get supersized salaries and millions of fans enjoy following their teams, sports are a big business that provides big profits for a small number of people (predominantly white men). In sum, sports in the United States are bound up with inequalities based on gender, race, and economic power.

Sports as Interaction

At the micro-level, a sporting event is a complex, face-to-face interaction. In part, play is guided by the players' assigned positions and the rules of the game. But players are also spontaneous and unpredictable. Following the symbolic-interaction approach, we see sports less as a system than as an ongoing process.

From this point of view, too, we expect each player to understand the game a little differently. Some players enjoy a setting of stiff competition; for others, love of the game may be greater than the need to win.

In addition, the behavior of any single player may change over time. A rookie in professional baseball, for example, may feel self-conscious during the first few games in the big leagues but go on to develop a comfortable sense of fitting in with the team. Coming to feel at home on the field was slow and painful for Jackie Robinson, who knew that many white players, and millions of white fans, resented his presence. In time, however, his outstanding ability and his confident and cooperative manner won him the respect of the entire nation.

The three theoretical approaches—the structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approach, and the symbolic-interaction approach—provide different insights into sports, and none is more correct than the others. Applied to any issue, each approach generates its own interpretations. To appreciate fully the power of the sociological perspective, you should become familiar with all three.



Apply the three theoretical approaches to the issues that opened this chapter—love and marriage. Consider questions such as these: What categories of people are you most likely to date? Why? Why are today's younger college students likely to wait many more years to marry than students did fifty years ago?

The Controversy & Debate box on page 21 discusses the use of the sociological perspective and reviews many of the ideas presented in this chapter. This box raises a number of questions that will help you understand how sociological generalizations differ from the common stereotypes we encounter every day.

Applying Sociology in Everyday Life

1. Explore your local area, and draw a sociological map of the community. Include the types of buildings (for example, “big single-family homes,” “rundown business area,” “new office buildings,” “student apartments”) found in various places, and guess at the categories of people who live or work there. What patterns do you see?
2. Figure 18–2 on page 478 shows the U.S. divorce rate over the past century. Using the sociological perspective and with an eye on the timeline inside the front cover of this book, try to identify societal factors that pushed the divorce rate down after 1930, up again after 1940, down in the 1950s, up after 1960, and down again after 1980.
3. Observe male-female couples holding hands. In almost every case, the male will hold hands with his wrist to the front, and the female will do so with her wrist to the rear. Thinking sociologically, what general societal pattern do you see in this particular situation?

MAKING THE GRADE

CHAPTER 1 The Sociological Perspective



What Is the Sociological Perspective?

The **SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE** reveals the power of society to shape individual lives.

- What we commonly think of as personal choice—whether or not to go to college, how many children we will have, even the decision to end our own life—is affected by social forces.
- Peter Berger described the sociological perspective as “seeing the general in the particular.”
- C. Wright Mills called this point of view the “sociological imagination,” claiming it transforms personal troubles into public issues.
- The experience of being an outsider or of living through a social crisis can encourage people to use the sociological perspective.

pp 2–6

sociology (p. 2) the systematic study of human society

sociological perspective (p. 2) the special point of view of sociology that sees general patterns of society in the lives of particular people

The Importance of a Global Perspective

Where we live—in a **high-income country** like the United States, a **middle-income country** such as Mexico, or a **low-income country** such as Mali—shapes the lives we lead.

p 6

Many social problems that we face in the United States are far more serious in other countries.

p 8

Societies throughout the world are increasingly interconnected.

- New technology allows people around the world to share popular trends.
- Immigration from around the world increases the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States.
- Trade across national boundaries has created a global economy.

pp 7–8

global perspective (p. 6) the study of the larger world and our society's place in it

high-income countries (p. 6) nations with the highest overall standards of living

middle-income countries (p. 6) nations with a standard of living about average for the world as a whole

low-income countries (p. 6) nations with a low standard of living in which most people are poor

Learning about life in other societies helps us learn more about ourselves.

p 8

Applying the Sociological Perspective

Research by sociologists plays an important role in shaping **public policy**.

p 9

On a **personal level**, using the sociological perspective helps us see the opportunities and limits in our lives and empowers us to be active citizens.

p 9

A background in sociology is excellent preparation for success in many different **careers**.

pp 9–12

Origins of Sociology

RAPID SOCIAL CHANGE in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made people more aware of their surroundings and helped trigger the development of sociology:

- The **rise of an industrial economy** moved work from homes to factories, weakening the traditions that had guided community life for centuries.
- The **explosive growth of cities** created many social problems, such as crime and homelessness.
- **Political change** based on ideas of individual liberty and individual rights encouraged people to question the structure of society.

pp 12–13

positivism (p. 13) a way of understanding based on science

AUGUSTE COMTE named sociology in 1838 to describe a new way of looking at society.

- Early philosophers had tried to describe the ideal society.
- Comte wanted to understand society as it really is by using **positivism**, a way of understanding based on science.
- Karl Marx and many later sociologists used sociology to try to make society better.

pp 13–14

✓ *The countries that experienced the most rapid social change were those in which sociology developed first (pp 12–13).*

MAKING THE GRADE *continued* . . .



Sociological Theory

A **THEORY** states how facts are related, weaving observations into insight and understanding. Sociologists use three major **THEORETICAL APPROACHES** to describe the operation of society.

p 14



The **STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH** explores how **social structures**—patterns of behavior, such as religious rituals or family life—work together to help society operate.

- Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Herbert Spencer helped develop the structural-functional approach.
- Thomas Merton pointed out that social structures have both **manifest functions** and **latent functions**; he also identified **social dysfunctions** as patterns that may disrupt the operation of society.

pp 14–15

The **SOCIAL-CONFLICT APPROACH** shows how inequality creates conflict and causes change.

- Karl Marx helped develop the social-conflict approach.
- The **gender-conflict approach**, linked to **feminism**, focuses on ways in which society places men in positions of power over women. Harriet Martineau is regarded as the first woman sociologist.
- The **race-conflict approach** focuses on the advantages—including higher income, more schooling, and better health—that society gives to white people over people of color.
- W. E. B. Du Bois identified the “double consciousness” of African Americans.

pp 15–18



The **SYMBOLIC-INTERACTION APPROACH** studies how people, in everyday interaction, construct reality.

- Max Weber's claim that people's beliefs and values shape society is the basis of the social-interaction approach.
- Social-exchange analysis states that social life is guided by what each person stands to gain or lose from the interaction.

pp 17–18

☐ See the Applying Theory table on page 19.

✓ *To get the full benefit of the sociological perspective, apply all three approaches.*

Applying the Approaches: The Sociology of Sports

THE FUNCTIONS OF SPORTS

The structural-functional approach looks at how sports help society function smoothly.

- Manifest functions of sports include providing recreation, a means of getting in physical shape, and a relatively harmless way to let off steam.
- Latent functions of sports include building social relationships and creating thousands of jobs.

p 19

SPORTS AND CONFLICT

The social-conflict approach looks at the links between sports and social inequality.

- Historically, sports have benefited men more than women.
- Some sports—such as golf, sailing, and skiing—are accessible mainly to affluent people.
- Racial discrimination exists in professional sports.

pp 20–22

SPORTS AS INTERACTION

The social-interaction approach looks at the different meanings and understandings people have of sports.

- Within a team, players affect each other's understanding of the sport.
- The reaction of the public can affect how players perceive their sport.

p 22

✓ *Sociology helps us understand the difference between well-grounded generalizations and unfair stereotypes (p 21).*

theory (p. 14) a statement of how and why specific facts are related

theoretical approach (p. 14) a basic image of society that guides thinking and research

structural-functional approach (p. 14) a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability

social structure (p. 14) any relatively stable pattern of social behavior

social functions (p. 14) the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole

manifest functions (p. 15) the recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern

latent functions (p. 15) the unrecognized and unintended consequences of any social pattern

social dysfunction (p. 15) any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society

social-conflict approach (p. 15) a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change

gender-conflict approach (p. 16) a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between women and men

feminism (p. 16) support of social equality for women and men

race-conflict approach (p. 16) a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between people of different racial and ethnic categories

macro-level orientation (p. 17) a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole

micro-level orientation (p. 17) a close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations

symbolic-interaction approach (p. 17) a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals

stereotype (p. 21) a simplified description applied to every person in some category

Sample Test Questions

These questions are similar to those found in the test bank that accompanies this textbook.

Multiple-Choice Questions

- What does the sociological perspective tell us about whom any individual chooses to marry?
 - There is no explaining personal feelings like love.
 - People's actions reflect human free will.
 - The operation of society guides many of our personal choices.
 - In the case of love, opposites attract.
- Which early sociologist studied patterns of suicide?
 - Peter Berger
 - Emile Durkheim
 - Auguste Comte
 - Karl Marx
- The personal value of studying sociology includes
 - seeing the opportunities and constraints in our lives.
 - the fact that it is good preparation for a number of jobs.
 - being more active participants in society.
 - All of the above are correct.
- The discipline of sociology first developed in
 - countries experiencing rapid social change.
 - countries with little social change.
 - countries with a history of warfare.
 - the world's poorest countries.
- Which early sociologist coined the term *sociology* in 1838?
 - Karl Marx
 - Herbert Spencer
 - Adam Smith
 - Auguste Comte
- Which theoretical approach is closest to that taken by early sociologists Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim?
 - the symbolic-interaction approach
 - the structural-functional approach
 - the social-conflict approach
 - None of the above is correct.
- Which term refers to the recognized and intended consequences of a social pattern?
 - manifest functions
 - latent functions
 - eufunctions
 - dysfunctions
- Sociology's social-conflict approach draws attention to
 - how structure contributes to the overall operation of society.
 - how people construct meaning through interaction.
 - patterns of social inequality.
 - the stable aspects of society.
- Which woman, among the first sociologists, studied the evils of slavery and also translated the writings of Auguste Comte?
 - Elizabeth Cady Stanton
 - Jane Addams
 - Harriet Martineau
 - Margaret Mead
- Which of the following illustrates a micro-level focus?
 - the operation of the U.S. political system
 - patterns of global terrorism
 - class inequality in the armed forces
 - two new dormitory roommates getting to know one another

ANSWERS: 1(c); 2(b); 3(d); 4(a); 5(d); 6(b); 7(a); 8(c); 9(c); 10(d).

Essay Questions

- Explain why applying the sociological perspective can make us seem less in control of our lives. In what ways does it actually give us greater power over our lives?
- Guided by the discipline's three major theoretical approaches, come up with sociological questions about (a) television, (b) war, and (c) colleges and universities.



Sociology isn't just a way of looking at our surroundings; it is also a system for learning about how society operates and finding out how people experience their world.



CHAPTER

2

Sociological Investigation

HOW does sociological research challenge common sense?

WHY do sociologists use different methods to do research?

WHAT part do gender and cultural differences play in sociological research?



While on a visit to Atlanta during the winter holiday season, the sociologist Lois Benjamin (1991) called up the mother of an old college friend. Benjamin was eager to learn about Sheba; the two women both had dreamed about earning a graduate degree, landing a teaching job, and writing books. Now a successful university professor, Benjamin had seen her dream come true. But as she soon found out, this was not the case with Sheba.

Benjamin recalled early signs of trouble. After college, Sheba had begun graduate work at a Canadian university. But in letters to Benjamin, Sheba became more and more critical of the world and seemed to be cutting herself off from others. Some wondered if she was suffering from a personality disorder.

But as Sheba saw it, the problem was racism. As an African American woman, she felt she was the target of racial hostility. Before long, she flunked out of school, blaming the failure on her white professors. At this point, she left North America, earning a Ph.D. in England and then settling in Nigeria. In the years since, Benjamin had not heard from her longtime friend.

Benjamin was happy to hear that Sheba had returned to Atlanta. But her delight dissolved into shock when she saw Sheba and realized that her friend had suffered a mental breakdown and was barely responsive to anyone.

For months, Sheba's emotional collapse troubled Benjamin. Obviously, Sheba was suffering from serious psychological problems. Having felt the sting of racism herself, Benjamin wondered if this might have played a part in Sheba's story. Partly as a tribute to her old friend, Benjamin set out to explore the effects of race in the lives of bright, well-educated African Americans in the United States.

Benjamin knew she was calling into question the common belief that race is less of a barrier today than it used to be, especially to talented African Americans (W. J. Wilson, 1978). But her own experiences—and, she believed, Sheba's too—seemed to contradict such thinking.

To test her ideas, Benjamin spent the next two years asking 100 successful African Americans across the country how race affected their lives. In the words of these “Talented One Hundred”¹ men and women, she found evidence that even among privileged African Americans, racism remains a heavy burden.

Later in this chapter, we will take a closer look at Lois Benjamin's research. For now, notice how the sociological perspective helped her spot broad social patterns in the lives of individuals. Just as important, Benjamin's work shows us the *doing* of sociology, the process of *sociological investigation*.

Many people think that scientists work only in laboratories, carefully taking measurements using complex equipment. But as this chapter explains, although some sociologists do conduct scientific research in laboratories, most work on neighborhood streets, in homes and workplaces, in schools and hospitals, in bars and prisons—in short, wherever people can be found.

This chapter examines the methods that sociologists use to conduct research. Along the way, we shall see that research involves not just ways of gathering information but controversies about values: Should researchers strive to be objective? Or should they point to the need for change? Certainly Lois Benjamin did not begin her study just to show that racism exists; she wanted to bring racism out in the open as a way to challenge it. We shall

tackle questions of values after presenting the basics of sociological investigation.

Basics of Sociological Investigation

Sociological investigation starts with two simple requirements. The first was the focus of Chapter 1: *Apply the sociological perspective*. This point of view reveals curious patterns of behavior all around us that call for further study. It was Lois Benjamin's sociological imagination that prompted her to wonder how race affects the lives of talented African Americans.

This brings us to the second requirement: *Be curious and ask questions*. Benjamin wanted to learn more about how race affects people who are high achievers. She began by asking, Who are the leaders of this nation's black community? What effect does being part of a racial minority have on their view of themselves? On the way white people perceive them and their work?

Seeing the world sociologically and asking questions are basic to sociological investigation. But where do we look for answers? To answer this question, we need to realize that there are various kinds of “truth.”

¹W. E. B. Du Bois used the term “Talented Tenth” to refer to African American leaders.

Chapter Overview

This chapter explains how sociologists “do” sociology. First, it looks at science as a way of knowing and then discusses two limitations to scientific sociology that are addressed by two other approaches to knowing—interpretive sociology and critical sociology. Finally, it explains four methods of data collection.

Science as One Form of Truth

Saying that we “know” something can mean many things. Most people in the United States, for instance, say they believe in God. Few claim to have direct contact with God, but they say they believe all the same. We call this kind of knowing “belief” or “faith.”

A second kind of truth comes from recognized experts. Students with a health problem, for example, may consult a campus physician or search the Internet for articles written by experts in the field.

A third type of truth is based on simple agreement among ordinary people. Most of us in the United States would probably say we “know” that sexual intercourse among ten-year-old children is wrong. But why? Mostly because just about everyone says it is.

People’s “truths” differ the world over, and we often encounter “facts” at odds with our own. Imagine being a Peace Corps volunteer who has just arrived in a small, traditional village in Latin America. Your job is to help local people grow more crops. On your first day in the fields, you observe a strange practice: After planting the seeds, the farmers lay a dead fish on top of the soil. When you ask about this, they explain that the fish is a gift to the god of the harvest. A village elder adds sternly that the harvest was poor one year when no fish were offered.

From that society’s point of view, using fish as gifts to the harvest god makes sense. The people believe in it, their experts endorse it, and everyone seems to agree that the system works. But with scientific training in agriculture, you have to shake your head and wonder. The scientific “truth” in this situation is something entirely different: The decomposing fish fertilize the ground, producing a better crop.

Science represents a fourth way of knowing. Science is a logical system that bases knowledge on direct, systematic observation. Standing apart from faith, the wisdom of “experts,” and general agreement, scientific knowledge rests on **empirical evidence**, that is, *information we can verify with our senses*.

Our Peace Corps example does not mean that people in traditional villages ignore what their senses tell them or that members of technologically advanced societies use only science to know things. A medical researcher using science to develop a new drug for treating cancer, for example, may still practice her religion as a matter of faith, turn to financial experts when making decisions about money, and pay attention to the political opinions of her family and friends. In short, we all hold various kinds of truths at the same time.

Common Sense versus Scientific Evidence

Like the sociological perspective, scientific evidence sometimes challenges our common sense. Here are six statements that many North Americans assume are true:



In a complex and ever-changing world, there are many different “truths.” This Peace Corps volunteer, who spent a year on a small island in the South Pacific, learned a crucial lesson—that other people often see things in a different way. There is great value in our own scientific approach to truth, but there are also important truths in the ancient traditions of people living around the world.

1. **“Poor people are far more likely than rich people to break the law.”** Not true. If you regularly watch television shows like *Cops*, you might think that police arrest only people from “bad” neighborhoods. Chapter 9 (“Deviance”) explains that poor people do stand out in the official arrest statistics. But research also shows that police and prosecutors are more likely to treat well-to-do people more leniently, as when a Hollywood celebrity is accused of shoplifting or drunk driving. Some laws are even written in a way that criminalizes poor people more and affluent people less.
2. **“The United States is a middle-class society in which most people are more or less equal.”** False. Data presented in Chapter 11 (“Social Class in the United States”) show that the richest 5 percent of U.S. families control 60 percent of the nation’s total wealth, but almost half of all families have scarcely any wealth at all.
3. **“Most poor people don’t want to work.”** Wrong. Research described in Chapter 11 indicates that this statement is true of some but not most poor people. In fact, about half of poor individuals in the United States are children and elderly people who are not expected to work.
4. **“Differences in the behavior of females and males are just ‘human nature.’”** Wrong again. Much of what we call



tip

By showing how common sense can mislead us, we see the importance of sociological research in helping us more accurately understand our world. All of the examples used on this page are discussed in greater detail in later chapters.



student 2 student

“Am I being too far out to say that the world might be a better place if everyone had taken a course in sociology?”



Common sense suggests that in a world of possibilities, people fall in love with that “special someone.” Sociological research reveals that the vast majority of people select partners who are very similar in social background to themselves.

“human nature” is constructed by the society in which we live, as Chapter 3 (“Culture”) explains. Further, as Chapter 13 (“Gender Stratification”) argues, some societies define “feminine” and “masculine” very differently from the way we do.

5. **“People change as they grow old, losing many interests as they focus on their health.”** Not really. Chapter 15 (“Aging and the Elderly”) reports that aging changes our personalities very little. Problems of health increase in old age, but by and large, elderly people keep the distinctive personalities they have had throughout their adult lives.
6. **“Most people marry because they are in love.”** Not always. To members of our society, few statements are so obvious. Surprisingly, however, in many societies marriage has little to do with love. Chapter 18 (“Families”) explains why.

These examples confirm the old saying that “it’s not what we *don’t* know that gets us into trouble as much as the things we *do* know that *just aren’t so*.” We have all been brought up believing widely accepted truths, being bombarded by expert advice, and feeling pressure to accept the opinions of people around us. As adults, we need to evaluate more critically what we see, read, and hear. Sociology can help us do just that. “In the *Times*” shows how collecting data leads researchers to a better understanding of recent trends in marriage.



Think of several “commonsense” ideas you were brought up to believe that you later learned were not true.

Three Ways to Do Sociology

“Doing” sociology means learning more about the social world. There is more than one way to do this. Just as sociologists can use one or more theoretical approaches (described in Chapter 1, “The Sociological Perspective”), they may also use different research orientations. The following sections describe three ways to do research: scientific sociology, interpretive sociology, and critical sociology.

Scientific Sociology

Chapter 1 explained how early sociologists such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim applied science to the study of society just as natural scientists investigate the physical world. **Scientific sociology**, then, is *the study of society based on systematic observation of social behavior*. The scientific orientation to knowing, called *positivism*, assumes that an objective reality exists “out there.” The job of the scientist is to discover this reality by gathering empirical evidence, facts we can verify with our senses, say, by “seeing,” “hearing,” or “touching.”

Concepts, Variables, and Measurement

A basic element of science is the **concept**, *a mental construct that represents some part of the world in a simplified form*. “Society” is a concept, as are the structural parts of societies, such as “the family” and “the economy.” Sociologists also use concepts to describe people, as when we speak of someone’s “race” or “social class.”

A **variable** is *a concept whose value changes from case to case*. The familiar variable “price,” for example, changes from item to item in a supermarket. Similarly, we use the concept “social class” to identify people as “upper-class,” “middle-class,” “working-class,” or “lower-class.”

The use of variables depends on **measurement**, *a procedure for determining the value of a variable in a specific case*. Some variables are easy to measure, as when you step on a scale to see how much you weigh. But measuring sociological variables can be far more difficult. For example, how would you measure a person’s “social class”? You might look at clothing, listen to patterns of speech, or note a home address. Or trying to be more precise, you might ask about income, occupation, and education.

Because almost any variable can be measured in more than one way, sociologists often have to decide which factors to consider. For example, having a very high income might qualify a person as “upper-class.” But what if the income comes from selling automobiles, an occupation most people think of as “middle-class”? Would having only an eighth-grade education make the person “lower-class”? In a case like this, sociologists usually combine these three measures—**income, occupation, and education**—to assign social class, as described in Chapter 10 (“Social Stratification”) and Chapter 11 (“Social Class in the United States”).

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Why Are There So Many Single Americans?

BY KATE ZERNIKE
January 21, 2007

The news that 51 percent of all women live without a spouse might be enough to make you invest in cat futures.

But consider, too, the flip side: about half of all men find themselves in the same situation. . . .

When it comes to marriage, the two Americas aren't divided by gender. . . . The emerging gulf is instead one of class—what demographers, sociologists and those who study the often depressing statistics about the wedded state call a “marriage gap” between the well-off and the less so.

Statistics show that college educated women are more likely to marry than non-college educated women—although they marry, on average, two years later. . . . In the past, less educated women often “married up.” . . . Now, marriage has become more one of equals; when more highly educated men marry, it tends to be to more highly educated women. . . .

Women with more education also are becoming less likely to divorce, or inclined to divorce, than those with less education. They are even less likely to be widowed all in all, less likely to end up alone.

“Educated women used to have a difficult time,” said David Popenoe, co-director of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University. “Now they’re the most desired. . . .”

The difference extends across race lines: black women are significantly less likely to marry than white women, but among blacks, women with a college education are more likely to marry than those who do not.

Among women ages 25–34, 59 percent of college graduates are married, compared with 51 percent of non-college graduates, according to an analysis of the Census Bureau’s June 2006 Current Population Survey by Steven P. Martin, a sociologist at the University of Maryland. The same is true at older age groups: the difference is 75 percent to 62 percent for those ages 35–44, and 50 percent to 41 percent among those 65 and older. . . .

Why have things changed so much for women who don’t have the choices that educated women have? While marriage used to be something you did before launching a life or career, now it is seen as something you do after you’re financially stable—when you can buy a house, say. The same is true for all classes. But the less educated may not get there.

“Women are saying, ‘I’m not ready, I want to work for a while, the guys I hang around with don’t make enough money . . .,’” [said Christopher Jencks, professor of social policy at Harvard]. . . .

Women of all education levels figure their earning power will flatten out after they have children, he said. “The longer you wait, the higher the level it flattens out at. That’s a good argument to wait. . . .”

Maybe in the past, a man with little education nevertheless had a good-paying manufacturing job, with a health care and pension plan. He was a catch and represented stability.

Today, it may be hyperbolic to talk about the emasculation of the blue-collar man. But it is not only liberals concerned with the wealth gap who are watching these national trends with alarm. Social and religious conservatives have called on society to do more to address economic strains faced by this class.

“Marriage is more difficult today than it was in the past,” Mr. Popenoe said. “The people who excel in one area probably excel in that area, too. And people who are high school dropouts probably have a higher propensity to drop out of marriage.”

The last 30 years have seen a huge shift in educated women’s attitudes about divorce. Mr. Martin, who has written about women and divorce, said that three decades ago, about 30 percent of women who had graduated from college said it should be harder to get a divorce. Now, about 65 percent say so, he said.

But for less educated women and for men, the numbers have not changed; only 40 percent—a minority—say it should be harder to get a divorce.

“The way we used to look at marriage was that if women were highly educated, they had higher earning power, they were more culturally liberal and people might have predicted less marriage among them,” Mr. Martin said. “What’s becoming more powerful is the idea that economic resources are conducive to stable marriages. Women who have more money or the potential for more money are married to men who have more stable income.”

All this leads to a happiness gap, too. According to the Marriage Project, the percentage of spouses who rate their marriage as “very happy” has dropped among those without a college education, while it has risen or held steady among those better educated.

The better educated husbands and wives tend to share intellectual interests and economic backgrounds, as well as ideas about the division of household roles. They also have more earning power. And as in so many other things, in marriage, money helps ease the way.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. What is the class-based “marriage gap”? What are some reasons for this gap?
2. Being economically secure may strengthen marriage, but does being married also help people enjoy higher income? Explain.
3. Have economics played a part in your own decision to marry or not to marry? If so, how?

Adapted from the original article by Kate Zernike published in *The New York Times* on January 21, 2007. Copyright © 2007 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted with permission.



tip

The concepts in this section on scientific sociology are the basic elements of science. They are familiar to anyone doing scientific research not just in sociology but also in other disciplines, including biology, chemistry, and psychology.



get it right

Be sure you understand the meaning of these concepts: variable, measurement, operationalizing a variable, reliability, and validity.



Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life

Three Useful (and Simple) Descriptive Statistics

The admissions office at your school is preparing a new brochure, and as part of your work-study job in that office, your supervisor asks you to determine the average salary received by last year's graduating class. To keep matters simple, assume that you talk to only seven members of the class (a real study would require contacting many more) and gather the following data on their present incomes:

\$30,000	\$42,000
\$22,000	\$165,000
\$22,000	\$35,000
\$34,000	

Sociologists use three different descriptive statistics to report averages. The simplest statistic is the *mode*, the value that occurs most often in a series of numbers. In this example, the mode is \$22,000, since that value occurs two times and each of the others occurs only once. If all the values were to occur only once, there would be no mode; if two different values each occurred

two or three times, there would be two modes. Although it is easy to identify, sociologists rarely use the mode because it reflects only some of the numbers and is therefore a crude measure of the "average."

A more common statistic, the *mean*, refers to the arithmetic average of a series of numbers, calculated by adding all the values together and dividing by the number of cases. The sum of the seven incomes is \$350,000. Dividing by 7 yields a mean income of \$50,000. But notice that the mean is not a very good "average" because it is higher than six of the seven incomes and is not particularly close to any of the actual numbers. Because the mean is "pulled" up or down by an especially high or low value (in this case, the \$165,000 paid to one graduate, an athlete who signed as a rookie with the Cincinnati Reds farm team), it can give a distorted picture of any data that include one or more extreme scores.

The *median* is the middle case, the value that occurs midway in a series of numbers arranged from lowest to highest. Here the

median income for the seven graduates is \$34,000, because when the numbers are placed in order from lowest to highest, this value divides the series exactly in half, with three incomes higher and three lower. (With an even number of cases, the median is halfway between the two middle cases.) If there should be any extreme scores, the median (unlike the mean) is not affected by them. In such cases, the median gives a better picture of what is "average" than the mean.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Your grade point average (GPA) is an example of an average. Is it a mode, a median, or a mean? Explain.
2. Sociologists generally use the median instead of the mean when they study people's incomes. Can you see why?
3. Do a quick calculation of the mean, median, and mode for these simple numbers: 1, 2, 5, 6, 6.

Answers: mode = 5, median = 6, mean = 4.

Sociologists also face the problem of dealing with huge numbers of people. For example, how do you report income for thousands or even millions of U.S. families? Listing streams of numbers would carry little meaning and tells us nothing about the people as a whole. To solve this problem, sociologists use *descriptive statistics* to state what is "average" for a large number of people. The Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life box explains how.

Defining Concepts Measurement is always somewhat arbitrary because the value of any variable partly depends on how it is defined. In addition, deciding how to measure abstract concepts such as "love," "family," or "intelligence" can lead to lengthy debates.

Good research, therefore, requires that sociologists **operationalize a variable** by *specifying exactly what is to be measured before assigning a value to a variable*. Before measuring the concept of social class, for example, you would have to decide exactly what you were

going to measure—say, income level, years of schooling, or occupational prestige. Sometimes sociologists measure several of these things; in such cases, they need to specify exactly how they plan to combine these variables into one overall score. The next time you read the results of a study, notice the way the researchers operationalize each variable. How they define terms can greatly affect the results.

When deciding how to operationalize variables, sociologists often take into account the opinions of the people they study. Since 1977, for example, researchers at the U.S. Census Bureau have defined race and ethnicity as white, black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native. One problem with this system is that someone can be *both* Hispanic and white or black; similarly, people of Arab ancestry might not identify with *any* of these choices. Just as important, an increasing number of people in the United States are *multiracial*. Because of the changing face of the U.S. population, the 2000 census was the first one to allow people to describe their



tip

The reason science places such high value on identifying cause-and-effect relationships is that this knowledge gives us control over the world—the power to change one variable by adjusting another. It also gives us the power to predict; knowing the value of the causal variable, we can predict the value of the effect variable.



tip

Look at the photo below and carefully read the caption. Notice how this example shows us that in everyday situations, it is often difficult to tell which factor is a “cause” and which is an “effect.”

race and ethnicity by selecting more than one category, resulting in a more accurate description of the true diversity of the population.

Reliability and Validity For a measurement to be useful, it must be reliable and valid. **Reliability** refers to *consistency in measurement*. A measurement is reliable if repeated measurements give the same result time after time. But consistency does not guarantee **validity**, which means *actually measuring exactly what you intend to measure*.

Getting a valid measurement is sometimes tricky. For example, if you want to study how “religious” people are, you might ask the people you are studying how often they attend religious services. But is going to a church, temple, or mosque really the same thing as being religious? People may attend religious services because of deep personal beliefs, but they may also do so out of habit or because others pressure them to go. And what about spiritual people who avoid organized religion altogether? Even when a measurement yields consistent results (making it reliable), it still may not measure what we want it to (and therefore lack validity). Chapter 19 (“Religion”) suggests that measuring religiosity should take account of not only church attendance but also a person’s beliefs and the degree to which a person lives by religious convictions. In sum, careful measurement is important, but it is also often a challenge.



Alcohol abuse is common among many homeless people. But knowing that homelessness and alcohol abuse are correlated does not establish cause and effect. Can you see how abusing alcohol could lead to becoming homeless? Can you see how becoming homeless might lead people to abuse alcohol?



What specific questions would you ask in order to measure a person’s social class position?

Relationships among Variables Once measurements are made, investigators can pursue the real payoff: seeing how variables are related. The scientific ideal is **cause and effect**, a *relationship in which change in one variable causes change in another*. Cause-and-effect relationships occur around us every day, such as when studying hard for an exam results in a high grade. *The variable that causes the change* (in this case, how much you study) is called the **independent variable**. *The variable that changes* (the exam grade) is called the **dependent variable**. The value of one variable, in other words, depends on the value of another. Why is linking variables in terms of cause and effect important? Because this kind of relationship allows us to *predict* the outcome of future events—if we know one thing, we can accurately predict another. For example, knowing that studying hard results in a better exam grade, we can predict with confidence that if you do study hard for the next exam, you will receive a high grade, and if you do not study hard, your grade will suffer.

But just because two variables change together does not mean that they are linked by a cause-and-effect relationship. For example, sociologists have long recognized that juvenile delinquency is more common among young people who live in crowded housing. Say we operationalize the variable “juvenile delinquency” as the number of times a person under the age of eighteen has been arrested, and we define “crowded housing” by a home’s number of square feet of living space per person. It turns out that these variables are related: Delinquency rates are high in densely populated neighborhoods. But should we conclude that crowding in the home (in this case, the independent variable) is what causes delinquency (the dependent variable)?

Not necessarily. **Correlation** is a *relationship in which two (or more) variables change together*. We know that density and delinquency are correlated because they change together, as shown in part (a) of Figure 2–1. This relationship *may* mean that crowding causes more arrests, but it could also mean that some third factor is at work causing change in *both* of the variables under observation. To identify a third variable, think what kind of people live in crowded housing: people with less money and few choices—the poor. Poor children are also more likely to end up with police records. In reality, crowded housing and juvenile delinquency are found together because *both* are caused by a third factor—poverty—

✓ get it right

Correlation is not the same as cause and effect. To claim cause and effect, two variables must show correlation, the causal variable must come first, and there can be no evidence that the correlation is spurious.

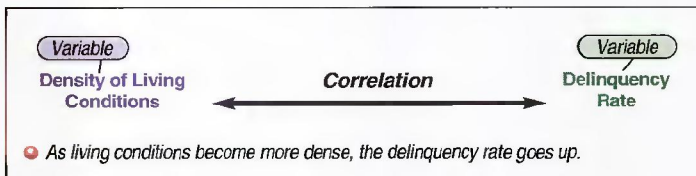


tip

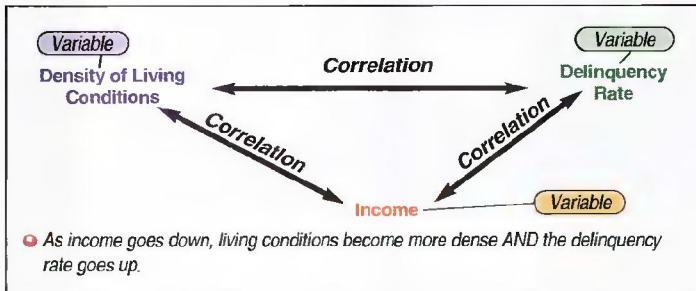
Spurious is another way of saying “false.”

FIGURE 2–1 Correlation and Cause: An Example

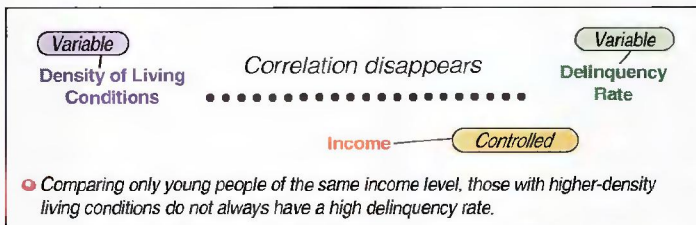
Correlation is not the same as cause. Here’s why.



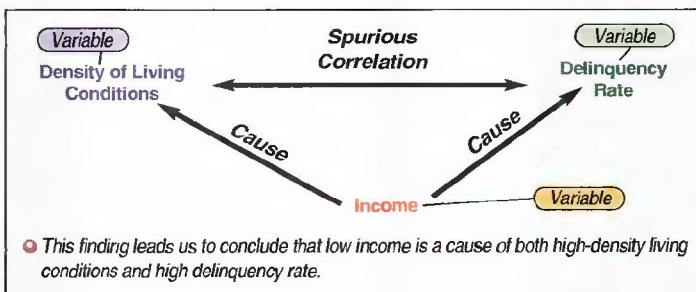
(a) If two variables increase and decrease together, they display correlation.



(b) Here we consider the effect of a third variable: income. Low income may cause both high-density living conditions and a high delinquency rate.



(c) When we control for income— that is, examine only young people of the same income level—we find that density of living conditions and delinquency rate no longer increase and decrease together.



(d) Density of living conditions and delinquency rate are correlated, but their correlation is *spurious* because neither one causes the other.

as shown in part (b) of Figure 2–1. In short, the apparent connection between crowding and delinquency is “explained away” by a third variable—low income—that causes them both to change. So our original connection turns out to be a **spurious correlation**, an *apparent but false relationship between two (or more) variables that is caused by some other variable*.

Exposing a correlation as spurious requires a bit of detective work, assisted by a technique called **control**, *holding constant all variables except one in order to see clearly the effect of that variable*. In our example, we suspect that income level may be causing a spurious link between housing density and delinquency. To check whether the correlation between delinquency and crowding is spurious, we control for income—that is, we hold income constant by looking at only young people of one income level. If the correlation between density and delinquency remains, that is, if young people of the same income level living in more crowded housing show higher rates of arrest than young people in less crowded housing, we have more reason to think that crowding does, in fact, cause delinquency. But if the relationship disappears when we control for income, as shown in part (c) of Figure 2–1, then we know we were dealing with a spurious correlation. In fact, research shows that the correlation between crowding and delinquency just about disappears if income is controlled (Fischer, 1984). So we have now sorted out the relationship among the three variables, as illustrated in part (d) of the figure. Housing density and juvenile delinquency have a spurious correlation; evidence shows that both variables rise or fall according to income.

To sum up, correlation means only that two (or more) variables change together. To establish cause and effect, three requirements must be met: (1) a demonstrated correlation, (2) an independent (or causal) variable that occurs before the dependent variable, and (3) no evidence that a third variable could be causing a spurious correlation between the two.

Natural scientists usually have an easier time than social scientists in identifying cause-and-effect relationships because most natural scientists work in laboratories, where they can control other variables. Carrying out research in a workplace or on the streets, however, makes control very difficult, so sociologists often have to settle for demonstrating only correlation. Also, human behavior is highly complex, involving dozens of causal variables at any one time, so establishing all the cause-and-effect relationships in any situation is extremely difficult.

The Ideal of Objectivity

Ten students are sitting around a dorm lounge discussing the dream vacation spot for the upcoming spring break. Do you think one place will end up being everyone’s clear favorite? That hardly seems likely.

In scientific terms, each of the ten people probably operationalizes the concept “dream vacation” differently. For one, it might be a



tip

The scientific ideal of researcher objectivity assumes the existence of a reality “out there” that we can understand by using our senses. By contrast, interpretive sociology, discussed below, claims that our subjectivity is the key to a reality that is within our minds.



get it right

Be sure you understand the difference between Weber's concepts of value-free and value-relevant research.

deserted, sunny beach in Mexico; for another, the choice might be New Orleans, a lively city with a very active social scene; for still another, hiking the Rocky Mountains below snow-capped peaks may be the choice. Like so many other “bests” in life, the best vacations turn out to be mostly a matter of individual taste.

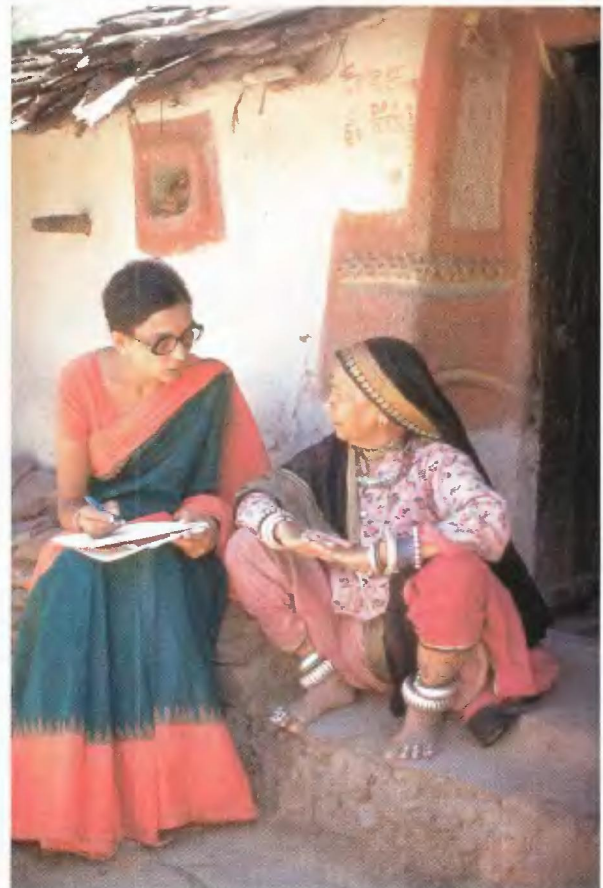
Personal values are fine when it comes to choosing travel destinations, but they pose a challenge to scientific research. Remember, science assumes that reality is “out there.” Scientists need to study this reality without changing it in any way, and so they strive for **objectivity**, *personal neutrality in conducting research*. Objectivity means that researchers carefully hold to scientific procedures and do not let their own attitudes and beliefs influence the results.

Scientific objectivity is an ideal rather than a reality, of course, because no one can be completely neutral. Even the topic someone chooses to study reflects a personal interest of one sort or another, as Lois Benjamin showed us in the reasons for her decision to investigate race. But the scientific ideal is to keep a professional distance or sense of detachment from the results, however they turn out. With this ideal in mind, you should do your best when conducting research to see that conscious or unconscious biases do not distort your findings. As an extra precaution, many researchers openly state their personal leanings in their research reports so that readers can interpret the conclusions with them in mind.

The influential German sociologist Max Weber expected that people would select their research topics according to their personal beliefs and interests. Why else, after all, would one person study world hunger, another investigate the effects of racism, and still another examine how children manage in one-parent families? Knowing that people select topics that are *value-relevant*, Weber cautioned researchers to be *value-free* in their investigations. Only by controlling their personal feelings and opinions (as we expect any professionals to do) can researchers study the world *as it is* rather than tell us *how they think it should be*. This detachment, for Weber, is a crucial element of science that sets it apart from politics. Politicians are committed to particular outcomes; scientists try to maintain an open mind about the results of their investigations, whatever they may turn out to be.

Weber's argument still carries much weight, although most sociologists admit that we can never be completely value-free or even aware of all our biases. Keep in mind, however, that sociologists are not “average” people: Most are white, highly educated, and more politically liberal than the population as a whole (Klein & Stern, 2004). Remember that sociologists, like everyone else, are influenced by their social backgrounds.

One way to limit distortion caused by personal values is **replication**, *repetition of research by other investigators*. If other researchers repeat a study using the same procedures and obtain the same results, we gain



One principle of scientific research is that sociologists and other investigators should try to be objective in their work, so that their personal values and beliefs do not distort their findings. But such a detached attitude may discourage the relationship needed in order for people to open up and share information. Thus sociologists have to decide how much to pursue objectivity and how much to show their own feelings.

confidence that the results are accurate (both reliable and valid). The need for replication in scientific investigation probably explains why the search for knowledge is called “*re*-search” in the first place.

Keep in mind that the logic of science does not guarantee objective, absolute truth. What science offers is an approach to knowledge that is *self-correcting* so that in the long run, researchers stand a good chance of limiting their biases. Objectivity and truth lie, then, not in any one study but in the scientific process itself as it continues over time.



tip

Science focuses our attention on what we can observe directly. In terms of social life, this means *actions* or *behavior*. But interpretive sociology reminds us that the reality we perceive is not action itself, but the *meaning* we attach to the action.



tip

“Interpretive” sociology is named this way because it reminds us that the key to understanding everyday life is interpreting the behavior of others.



Why do you think many doctors, teachers, and police officers avoid working professionally with their own children?

Some Limitations of Scientific Sociology

Science is one important way of knowing. Yet, applied to social life, science has several important limitations.

1. **Human behavior is too complex for sociologists to predict any individual’s actions precisely.** Astronomers calculate the movement of objects in the skies with remarkable precision, but comets and planets are unthinking objects. Humans, by contrast, have minds of their own, so no two people react to any event (whether it be a sports victory or a natural disaster) in exactly the same way. Sociologists must therefore be satisfied with showing that *categories* of people *typically* act in one way or another. This is not a failing of sociology. It simply reflects the fact that we study creative, spontaneous people.
2. **Because humans respond to their surroundings, the mere presence of a researcher may affect the behavior being studied.** An astronomer’s gaze has no effect whatever on a distant comet. But most people react to being observed. Try staring at someone for a few minutes and see for yourself. People being

watched may become anxious, angry, or defensive; others may be especially friendly or helpful. We can change people just by studying them.

3. **Social patterns change; what is true in one time or place may not hold true in another.** The same laws of physics will apply tomorrow as today, and they hold true all around the world. But human behavior is so variable that there are no universal sociological laws.
4. **Because sociologists are part of the social world they study, being value-free when conducting social research is difficult.** Barring a laboratory mishap, chemists are rarely personally affected by what goes on in test tubes. But sociologists live in their “test tube,” the society they study. Therefore, social scientists may find it difficult to control—or even to recognize—personal values that may distort their work.

Interpretive Sociology

All sociologists agree that studying social behavior scientifically presents some real challenges. But some sociologists go further, suggesting that science as it is used to study the natural world misses a vital part of the social world: *meaning*.

As humans, we do not simply act; we act for a reason. Max Weber, who pioneered this orientation, argued that the proper focus of



A basic lesson of social research is that being observed affects how people behave. Researchers can never be certain precisely how this will occur; some people resent public attention, but others become highly animated when they think they have an audience.

get it right

Be sure you understand the difference between quantitative and qualitative data.

get it right

Pay special attention to the discussion at the bottom of this column that links theoretical approaches to research orientations.

sociology must go beyond just observing behavior to include *interpretation*—learning what meaning people find in what they do. **Interpretive sociology** is the study of society that focuses on the meanings people attach to their social world.

The Importance of Meaning

Interpretive sociology differs from scientific, or positivist, sociology in three ways. First, scientific sociology focuses on actions, what people do; interpretive sociology, by contrast, focuses on the meaning people attach to their actions. Second, scientific sociology sees an objective reality “out there,” but interpretive sociology sees reality constructed by people themselves in the course of their everyday lives. Third, scientific sociology tends to favor *quantitative* data—numerical measurements of people’s behavior—and interpretive sociology favors *qualitative* data, or how people understand their surroundings.

The scientific orientation is well suited to research in a laboratory, where investigators stand back and take careful measurements. The interpretive orientation is better suited to research in a natural setting, where investigators interact with people, learning how they make sense of their everyday lives.

Weber’s Concept of *Verstehen*

Weber believed the key to interpretive sociology lay in *Verstehen* (pronounced “ver-SHTAY-in”), the German word for “understanding.” The interpretive sociologist does not just observe *what* people do but also tries to understand *why* they do it. The thoughts and feelings of subjects—which scientists tend to dismiss because they are difficult to measure—are the focus of the interpretive sociologist’s attention.

Critical Sociology

There is a third research orientation in sociology. Like the interpretive orientation, critical sociology developed in reaction to the limitations of scientific sociology. This time, however, the problem was the foremost principle of scientific research: objectivity.

Scientific sociology holds that reality is “out there” and the researcher’s task is to study and document this reality. But Karl Marx, who founded the critical orientation, rejected the idea that society exists as a “natural” system with a fixed order. To assume this, he claimed, is the same as saying that society cannot be changed. Scientific sociology, from this point of view, ends up supporting the status quo. **Critical sociology**, by contrast, is the study of society that focuses on the need for social change.

The Importance of Change

Rather than asking the scientific question “How does society work?” critical sociologists ask moral and political questions, such as “Should society exist in its present form?” Their answer to this question, typically, is that it should not. One recent account of this orientation, echoing Marx, claims that the point of sociology is “not just to research the social world but to change it in the direction of democracy and social justice” (Feagin & Hernán, 2001:1). In making value judgments about how society should be improved, critical sociology rejects Weber’s goal that researchers be value-free and emphasizes instead that they should be social activists in pursuit of desirable change.

Sociologists using the critical orientation seek to change not just society but the character of research itself. They often identify personally with their research subjects and encourage them to help decide what to study and how to do the work. Typically, researchers and subjects use their findings to provide a voice for less powerful people and to advance the political goal of a more equal society (B. B. Hess, 1999; Feagin & Hernán, 2001; Perrucci, 2001).

Sociology as Politics

Scientific sociologists object to taking sides in this way, charging that critical sociology (whether feminist, Marxist, or some other critical orientation) becomes political, lacks objectivity, and cannot correct for its own biases. Critical sociologists reply that *all* research is political or biased—either it calls for change or it does not. Sociologists, they continue, have no choice about their work being political, but they can choose *which* positions to support.

Critical sociology is an activist orientation tying knowledge to action, seeking not just to understand the world but also to improve it. Generally speaking, scientific sociology tends to appeal to researchers with nonpolitical or conservative political views; critical sociology appeals to those whose politics range from liberal to radical left.

Research Orientations and Theory

Is there a link between research orientations and sociological theory? There is no precise connection, but each of the three research orientations—scientific, interpretive, and critical—does stand closer to one of the theoretical approaches presented in Chapter 1 (“The Sociological Perspective”). Scientific sociology corresponds to the structural-functional approach, interpretive sociology is related to the symbolic-interaction approach, and critical sociology is linked to the social-conflict approach. The Summing Up table on page 38 provides a quick review of the differences among the three research orientations. Many sociologists favor one orientation over another; however,



tip

Looking closely at the Summing Up tables is a good way to check how well you understand the material. If you don't understand any of the material in this table, go back and review the section "Three Ways to Do Sociology."



tip

Gender affects almost every aspect of social life—including doing research. The discussion on this page explains how.

SUMMING UP

Three Research Orientations in Sociology

	Scientific	Interpretive	Critical
What is reality?	Society is an orderly system. There is an objective reality "out there."	Society is ongoing interaction. People construct reality as they attach meanings to their behavior.	Society is patterns of inequality. Reality is that some categories of people dominate others.
How do we conduct research?	Researcher gathers empirical, ideally quantitative, data. Researcher tries to be a neutral observer.	Researcher develops a qualitative account of the subjective sense people make of their world. Researcher is a participant.	Research is a strategy to bring about desired social change. Researcher is an activist.
Corresponding theoretical approach	Structural-functional approach	Symbolic-interaction approach	Social-conflict approach

because each provides useful insights, it is a good idea to become familiar with all three (Gamson, 1999).

Gender and Research

In recent years, sociologists have become aware that research is affected by **gender**, *the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being female or male*. Margrit Eichler (1988) identifies five ways in which gender can shape research:

- 1. Androcentricity.** Androcentricity refers to approaching an issue from a male perspective (*andro-* in Greek means "male"; *centricity* means "being centered on"). Sometimes researchers act as if only men's activities are important, ignoring what women do. For years, researchers studying occupations focused on the paid work of men and overlooked the housework and child care traditionally performed by women. Clearly, research that seeks to understand human behavior cannot ignore half of humanity.
Gynocentricity—seeing the world from a female perspective—can also limit good sociological investigation. However, in our male-dominated society, this problem arises less often.
- 2. Overgeneralizing.** This problem occurs when researchers use data drawn from people of only one sex to support conclusions about "humanity" or "society." Gathering information by talking to only male students and then drawing conclusions about an entire campus would be an example of overgeneralizing.

- 3. Gender blindness.** Failing to consider the variable of gender at all is known as gender blindness. As is evident throughout this book, the lives of men and women differ in countless ways. A study of growing old in the United States might suffer from gender blindness if it overlooked the fact that most elderly men live with their wives but elderly women typically live alone.
- 4. Double standards.** Researchers must be careful not to distort what they study by judging men and women differently. For example, a family researcher who labels a couple as "man and wife" may define the man as the "head of household" and treat him accordingly and assume that the woman simply engages in family "support work."
- 5. Interference.** Another way gender can distort a study is if a subject reacts to the sex of the researcher, interfering with the research operation. While studying a small community in Sicily, for instance, Maureen Giovannini (1992) found that many men treated her as a woman rather than as a researcher. Some thought it was wrong for any single woman to speak privately with a man. Others denied Giovannini access to places they considered off-limits to women.

There is nothing wrong with focusing research on one sex or the other. But all sociologists, as well as people who read their work, should be aware of the importance of gender in any investigation.



Think of three research topics in U.S. society that might be affected by the gender of the researcher. In each case, explain why.



tip

The following pages describe four methods of sociological research, beginning with the experiment and including survey research, participant observation, and the use of existing data.



get it right

The experiment is the method that comes closest to the logic of science. Experiments are rare in sociology because the high level of control that they require usually can only be achieved in a laboratory rather than in the “real world.” The example of an experiment, on page 41, was carried out by Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist.

Research Ethics

Like all researchers, sociologists must be aware that research can harm as well as help subjects or communities. For this reason, the American Sociological Association (ASA)—the major professional association of sociologists in North America—has established formal guidelines for conducting research (1997).

Sociologists must try to be skillful and fair-minded in their work. They must disclose all research findings without omitting significant data. They should make their results available to other sociologists who want to replicate a study.

Sociologists must also make sure that the subjects taking part in a research project are not harmed, and they must stop their work right away if they suspect that any subject is at risk of harm. Researchers are also required to protect the privacy of anyone involved in a research project, even if they come under pressure from the police or the courts to release confidential information. Researchers must also get the *informed consent* of participants, which means that subjects understand the responsibilities and risks that the research involves and agree—before the work begins—to take part.

Another important guideline concerns funding. Sociologists must include in their published results the sources of all financial support. They must also avoid taking money that raises concerns of conflicts of interest. For example, researchers must never accept funding from an organization that seeks to influence the research results for its own purposes.

The federal government also plays a part in research ethics. Every college and university that seeks federal funding for research involving human subjects must have an *institutional review board* (IRB) to review grant applications and ensure that research will not violate ethical standards.

Finally, there are global dimensions to research ethics. Before beginning research in another country, an investigator must become familiar enough with that society to understand what people *there* are likely to regard as a violation of privacy or a source of personal danger. In a multicultural society such as the United States, the same rule applies to studying people whose cultural background differs from your own. The Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, & Gender box on page 40 offers some tips about how outsiders can effectively and sensitively study Hispanic communities.

Methods of Sociological Research

A **research method** is a *systematic plan for doing research*. The remainder of this chapter introduces four commonly used methods of sociological investigation: experiments, surveys, participant observation,



If you ask only male subjects about their attitudes or actions, you may be able to support conclusions about “men” but not more generally about “society.” What would a researcher have to do to ensure that research data support conclusions about all of society?

and the use of existing data. None is better or worse than any other. Rather, in the same way that a carpenter selects a particular tool for a specific task, researchers choose a method—or mix several methods—according to whom they plan to study and what they wish to learn.

Testing a Hypothesis: The Experiment

The logic of science is most clearly found in the **experiment**, a *research method for investigating cause and effect under highly controlled conditions*. Experimental research is *explanatory*; that is, it asks not just what happens but why. Typically, researchers devise an experiment to test a **hypothesis**, a *statement of a possible relationship between two (or more) variables*. A hypothesis typically takes the form of an *if-then* statement: *If one thing were to happen, then something else will result.*

The ideal experiment consists of four steps. First, the researcher specifies the variable that is assumed to cause the change (the independent variable, or the “cause”) as well as the variable that is changed (the dependent variable, or the “effect”). Second, the researcher measures the initial value of the dependent variable. Third, the researcher exposes the dependent variable to the independent variable (the “treatment”). Fourth, the researcher again measures the dependent variable to see what change took place. If the expected change did occur, the experiment supports the hypothesis; if not, the hypothesis must be modified.



tip

Differences of race, class, ethnicity, or gender can affect the work of researchers, just as they can affect anyone else's job. Such differences are most likely to matter when research has a lot of face-to-face interaction, typical of interviews and also participant observation (discussed later in this chapter).



Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, & Gender Studying the Lives of Hispanics

JORGE: If you are going to include Latinos in your research, you need to learn a little about their culture.

MARK: I'm interviewing lots of different families. What's special about interviewing Latinos?

JORGE: Sit down and I'll tell you a few things you need to know . . .

Because U.S. society is racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse, all of us have to work with people who differ from ourselves. The same is true of sociologists. Learning—in advance—the ways of life of any category of people can ease the research process and ensure that there will be no hard feelings when the work is finished.

SOCIOLOGY WORK

Gerardo Marín and Barbara Van Oss Marín (1991) have identified five areas of concern in conducting research with Hispanic people:

1. Be careful with terms. The Maríns point out that the term “Hispanic” is a label of convenience used by the U.S. Census Bureau. Few people of Spanish descent think of themselves as “Hispanic” or “Latino”; most identify with a particular country (generally, with a Latin American nation, such as Mexico or Argentina, or with Spain).

2. Be aware of cultural differences. By and large, the United States is a nation of individualistic, competitive people. Many Hispanics, by contrast, place more value on cooperation and com-

munity. An outsider, then, may judge the behavior of a Hispanic subject as conformist or overly trusting when in fact the person is simply trying to be helpful. Researchers should also realize that Hispanic respondents might agree with a particular statement merely out of politeness.

3. Anticipate family dynamics. Generally speaking, Hispanic cultures have strong family loyalties. Asking subjects to reveal information about another family member may make them uncomfortable or even angry. The Maríns add that in the home, a researcher's request to speak privately with a Hispanic woman may provoke suspicion or outright disapproval from her husband or father.

4. Take your time. Spanish cultures, the Maríns explain, tend to place the quality of relationships above simply getting a job done. A non-Hispanic researcher who tries to hurry an interview with a Hispanic family, perhaps wishing not to delay the

family's dinner, may be considered rude for not proceeding at a more sociable and relaxed pace.

5. Think about personal space. Finally, people of Spanish-speaking ancestry typically maintain closer physical contact than many non-Hispanics. As a result, researchers who seat themselves across the room from their subjects may appear standoffish. Researchers might also wrongly label Hispanics as “pushy” when they move closer than non-Hispanic people find comfortable.

Of course, Hispanics differ among themselves, just like people in every other category, and these generalizations apply to some more than to others. But we need to be aware of them. The challenge of being culturally aware is especially great in the United States, where hundreds of categories of people make up our multicultural society.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Give a specific example of damage to a study that might take place if researchers are not sensitive to the culture of their subjects.
2. What do researchers need to do to avoid the kinds of problems noted in this box?
3. Discuss the research process with classmates from various cultural backgrounds. How are the concerns raised by people of different cultural backgrounds similar? How do they differ?



tip

Because the Zimbardo research raised the possibility of harm to subjects, it helped launch the development of research ethics in social science.




get it right

In the Zimbardo experiment described below, be sure you understand that the independent variable is the prison setting and the dependent variable is the violence that occurs.

But a change in the dependent variable could be due to something other than the supposed cause. (Think back to our discussion of spurious correlations.) To be certain that they identify the correct cause, researchers carefully control other factors that might affect the outcome of the experiment. Such control is easiest in a laboratory, a setting specially constructed to neutralize outside influences.

Another strategy to gain control is dividing subjects into an *experimental group* and a *control group*. Early in the study, the researcher measures the dependent variable for subjects in both groups but later exposes only the experimental group to the independent variable or treatment. (The control group typically gets a *placebo*, a treatment that the members of the group think is the same but really has no effect on the experiment.) Then the investigator measures the subjects in both groups again. Any factor occurring during the course of the research that influences people in the experimental group (say, a news event) would do the same to those in the control group, thus controlling or “washing out” the factor. By comparing the before and after measurements of the two groups, a researcher can learn how much of the change is due to the independent variable.

 **YOUR LEARNING** How does the experiment allow researchers to reach conclusions about cause and effect?

The Hawthorne Effect

Researchers need to be aware that subjects’ behavior may change simply because they are getting special attention, as one classic experiment revealed. In the late 1930s, the Western Electric Company hired researchers to investigate worker productivity in its Hawthorne factory near Chicago (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). One experiment tested the hypothesis that increasing the available lighting would raise worker output. First, researchers measured worker productivity (the dependent variable). Then they increased the lighting (the independent variable) and measured output a second time. The resulting increased productivity supported the hypothesis. But when the research team later turned the lighting back down, productivity increased again. What was going on? In time, the researchers realized that the employees were working harder (even if they could not see as well) simply because people were paying attention to them and measuring their output. From this research, social scientists coined the term **Hawthorne effect** to refer to a *change in a subject’s behavior caused simply by the awareness of being studied*.

Illustration of an Experiment: The Stanford County Prison

Prisons can be violent settings, but is this due simply to the “bad” people who end up there? Or as Philip Zimbardo suspected, does the

prison itself somehow generate violent behavior? This question led Zimbardo to devise a fascinating experiment, which he called the “Stanford County Prison” (Zimbardo, 1972; Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973).

Zimbardo thought that once inside a prison, even emotionally healthy people are prone to violence. Thus Zimbardo treated the *prison setting* as the independent variable capable of causing *violence*, the dependent variable.

To test this hypothesis, Zimbardo’s research team constructed a realistic-looking “prison” in the basement of the psychology building on the campus of California’s Stanford University. Then they placed an ad in the local newspaper, offering to pay young men to help with a two-week research project. To each of the seventy who responded they administered a series of physical and psychological tests and then selected the healthiest twenty-four.

The next step was to randomly assign half the men to be “prisoners” and half to be “guards.” The plan called for the guards and prisoners to spend the next two weeks in the mock prison. The prisoners



Philip Zimbardo’s research helps explain why violence is a common element in our society’s prisons. At the same time, his work demonstrates the dangers that sociological investigation poses for subjects and the need for investigators to observe ethical standards that protect the welfare of people who participate in research.

get it right

A *population* is all the people we want to learn about; you can collect data from an entire population if it is small enough (say, campus sociology majors). Or, if the population is too large, select a *sample*, which will give good results as long as it is representative of the entire population.



tip

Survey research involves questionnaires, which require you to set out all the questions ahead of time (“closed-ended format”), and/or interviews, which allow for more free-form conversation (“open-ended format”).

began their part of the experiment soon afterward when the city police “arrested” them at their homes. After searching and handcuffing the men, the police drove them to the local police station, where they were fingerprinted. Then police transported their captives to the Stanford prison, where the guards locked them up. Zimbardo started his video camera rolling and watched to see what would happen next.

The experiment turned into more than anyone had bargained for. Both guards and prisoners soon became embittered and hostile toward one another. Guards humiliated the prisoners by assigning them tasks such as cleaning out toilets with their bare hands. The prisoners resisted and insulted the guards. Within four days, the researchers removed five prisoners who displayed “extreme emotional depression, crying, rage and acute anxiety” (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973:81). Before the end of the first week, the situation had become so bad that the researchers had to cancel the experiment. Zimbardo explains:

The ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys (guards) treat others as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys (prisoners) became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival and of their mounting hatred for the guards. (Zimbardo, 1972:4)

The events that unfolded at the “Stanford County Prison” supported Zimbardo’s hypothesis that prison violence is rooted in the social character of jails themselves, not in the personalities of guards and prisoners. This finding raises questions about our society’s prisons, suggesting the need for basic reform. Notice, too, that this experiment shows the potential of research to threaten the physical and mental well-being of subjects. Such dangers are not always as obvious as they were in this case. Therefore, researchers must carefully consider the potential harm to subjects at all stages of their work and end any study, as Zimbardo did, if subjects may suffer harm of any kind.



How might Zimbardo’s findings help explain the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison?

Asking Questions: Survey Research

A **survey** is a research method in which subjects respond to a series of statements or questions in a questionnaire or an interview. The most widely used of all research methods, surveys are especially good for studying attitudes—such as beliefs about politics, religion, or race—since there is no way to observe directly what people think. Sometimes surveys provide clues about cause and effect, but typically they yield *descriptive* findings, painting a picture of people’s views on some issue.

Population and Sample

A survey targets some **population**, *the people who are the focus of research*. Lois Benjamin, in her study of racism described at the beginning of this chapter, studied a select population—talented African Americans. Other surveys such as political polls that predict election results treat every adult in the country as the population.

Obviously, contacting millions of people is impossible for even the best-funded and most patient researcher. Fortunately, there is an easier way that yields accurate results: Researchers collect data from a **sample**, *a part of a population that represents the whole*. Benjamin chose 100 talented African Americans as her sample. National political polls typically survey a sample of about 1,000 people.

Everyone uses the logic of sampling all the time. If you look at students sitting near you and notice five or six heads nodding off, you might conclude that the class finds the day’s lecture dull. In reaching this conclusion, you are making a judgment about *all* the people in the class (the “population”) from observing *some* of your classmates (the “sample”).

But how can we be sure that a sample really represents the entire population? One way is *random sampling*, in which researchers draw a sample from the population randomly so that every person in the population has an equal chance to be selected. The mathematical laws of probability dictate that a random sample is likely to represent the population as a whole. Selecting a random sample usually means listing everyone in the population and using a computer to make a random selection.

Beginning researchers sometimes make the mistake of assuming that “randomly” walking up to people on a street produces a sample that is representative of the entire city. Unfortunately, this technique does not give every person an equal chance to be included in the sample. For one thing, any street, whether in a rich neighborhood or on a college campus, contains more of some kinds of people than others. The fact that some people are more approachable than others is another source of bias.

Although good sampling is no simple task, it offers a considerable savings in time and expense. We are spared the tedious work of contacting everyone in a population, yet we can obtain essentially the same results.

Using Questionnaires

Selecting subjects is just the first step in carrying out a survey. Also needed is a plan for asking questions and recording answers. Most surveys use a questionnaire for this purpose.

A **questionnaire** is a series of written questions a researcher presents to subjects. One type of questionnaire provides not only the

✓ get it right

In general, questionnaires allow a researcher to collect lots of easily reported information—age, sex, whether they voted in the last election—from lots of people. Interviews allow researchers to collect in-depth information on a limited topic from a few people.

questions but also a selection of fixed responses (similar to a multiple-choice examination). This *closed-ended format* makes it fairly easy to analyze the results, but by narrowing the range of responses, it can also distort the findings. For example, Frederick Lorenz and Brent Bruton (1996) found that the number of hours per week students say they study for a college course depends on the options offered to them. When the researchers presented students with options ranging from one hour or less to nine hours or more, 75 percent said that they studied four hours or less per week. But when subjects in a comparable group were given choices ranging from four hours or less to twelve hours or longer (a higher figure that suggests students should study more), they suddenly became more studious; only 34 percent reported that they studied four hours or less each week.

A second type of questionnaire, using an *open-ended format*, allows subjects to respond freely, expressing various shades of opinion. The drawback of this approach is that the researcher has to make sense out of what can be a very wide range of answers.

The researcher must also decide how to present questions to subjects. Most often, researchers use a *self-administered survey*, mailing or e-mailing questionnaires to respondents and asking them to complete the form and send it back. Since no researcher is present when subjects read the questionnaire, it must be both inviting and clearly written. *Pretesting* a self-administered questionnaire with a small number of people before sending it to the entire sample can prevent the costly problem of finding out—too late—that instructions or questions were confusing.

Using the mail or e-mail allows a researcher to contact a large number of people over a wide geographic area at minimal expense. But many people treat such questionnaires as junk mail, so typically no more than half are completed and returned (in 2000, just two-thirds of people returned U.S. Census Bureau forms). Researchers must send follow-up mailings (or, as the Census Bureau does, visit people's homes) to urge reluctant subjects to respond.

Finally, keep in mind that many people are not capable of completing a questionnaire on their own. Young children obviously cannot, nor can many hospital patients or a surprising number of adults who simply lack the required reading and writing skills.

Conducting Interviews

An **interview** is a series of questions a researcher asks respondents in person. In a closed-format design, researchers read a question or statement and then ask the subject to select a response from several that are presented. More commonly, however, interviews are open-ended so that subjects can respond as they choose and researchers can probe with follow-up questions. In either case, the researcher must guard



Focus groups are a type of survey in which a small number of people representing a target population are asked for their opinions about some issue or product. Here, an organization opposed to cigarette smoking asks teens to judge which cigarette commercials seem most and least likely to get young people to light up.

against influencing a subject, which is as easy as raising an eyebrow when a person begins to answer.

Although subjects are more likely to complete a survey if contacted personally by the researcher, interviews have some disadvantages: Tracking people down is costly and takes time, especially if subjects do not live in the same area. Telephone interviews allow far greater “reach,” but the impersonality of cold calls by telephone (and reaching answering machines) can lower the response rate.

In both questionnaires and interviews, how a question is worded greatly affects how people answer. For example, when asked if they support our military, most adults in the United States said yes. Yet when asked if they support what the military is trying to do in Iraq, most said no. Emotionally loaded language can also sway subjects. For instance, using the expression “welfare mothers” rather than “women who receive public assistance” adds an emotional element to a question that encourages people to answer negatively.

Another problem is that researchers may confuse respondents by asking a double question, like “Do you think that the government should reduce the deficit by cutting spending and raising taxes?” The

✓ get it right

Be sure you understand the relative advantages and disadvantages of using questionnaires as opposed to conducting interviews.



student 2 student

"I tried doing interviews for my sociology paper; it's much harder than you think!"

issue here is that a subject could very well agree with one part of the question but not the other, so that forcing a subject to say yes or no distorts the opinion the researcher is trying to measure.

Conducting a good interview means standardizing the technique—treating all subjects in the same way. But this, too, can lead to problems. Drawing people out requires establishing rapport, which in turn depends on responding naturally to the particular person being interviewed, as you would in a normal conversation. In the end, researchers have to decide where to strike the balance between uniformity and rapport (Lavin & Maynard, 2001).

✓ **YOUR LEARNING** Provide an example of a research topic that might lead a researcher to use a questionnaire. What about a topic that would call for interviews?

Illustration of Survey Research: Studying the African American Elite

This chapter began by explaining how Lois Benjamin came to investigate the effects of racism on talented African American men and women. Benjamin suspected that personal achievement did not prevent hostility based on color. She believed this because of her own experiences after becoming the first black professor in the history of the University of Tampa. But was she the exception or the rule? To answer this question, Benjamin set out to discover whether—and if so, how—racism affected a number of the most successful African Americans.

Opting to conduct a survey, Benjamin chose to interview subjects rather than distribute a questionnaire because, first, she wanted to enter into a conversation with her subjects, to ask follow-up questions, and to pursue topics that she could not anticipate. A second reason Benjamin favored interviews over questionnaires is that racism is a sensitive topic. A supportive investigator can make it easier for subjects to respond to painful questions (Bergen, 1993).

Choosing to conduct interviews made it necessary to limit the number of people in the study. Benjamin settled for a sample of 100 men and women. Even this small number kept Benjamin busy for more than two years as she scheduled interviews, traveled all over the country, and met with her respondents. She spent two more years analyzing the tapes of her interviews, deciding what the hours of talk told her about racism, and writing up her results.

In selecting her sample, Benjamin first considered using all the people listed in *Who's Who in Black America*. But she rejected this idea in favor of starting out with people she knew and asking them to suggest others. This strategy is called *snowball sampling* because the number of individuals included grows rapidly over time.

Snowball sampling is an easy way to do research—we begin with familiar people who introduce us to their friends and colleagues. But snowball sampling rarely produces a sample that is representative of the larger population. Benjamin's sample probably contained many like-minded individuals, and it was certainly biased toward people willing to talk openly about race and prejudice. She understood these problems, and she did what she could to make her sample diverse in terms of sex, age, and region of the country. The *Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, & Gender* box presents a statistical profile of Benjamin's respondents and some tips on how to read tables.

Benjamin based all her interviews on a series of questions with an open-ended format so that her subjects could say whatever they wished. As usually happens, the interviews took place in a wide range of settings. She met subjects in offices (hers or theirs), in hotel rooms, and in cars. In each case, Benjamin tape-recorded the conversation, which lasted from two-and-one-half to three hours, so that she would not be distracted by taking notes.

As research ethics demand, Benjamin offered full anonymity to participants. Even so, many—including notables such as Vernon E. Jordan Jr. (former president of the National Urban League) and Yvonne Walker-Taylor (first woman president of Wilberforce University)—were used to being in the public eye and allowed Benjamin to use their names.

What surprised Benjamin most about her research was how eager many people were to be interviewed. These normally busy men and women seemed to go out of their way to contribute to her project. Benjamin reports, too, that once the interviews were under way, many became very emotional—at some point in the conversation, about 40 of her 100 subjects cried. For them, apparently, the research provided a chance to release feelings long kept inside. How did Benjamin respond? She reports that she cried right along with them.

Of the research orientations described earlier in the chapter, you will see that Benjamin's study fits best under interpretive sociology (she explored what race meant to her subjects) and critical sociology (she undertook the study partly to document that racial prejudice still exists). Many of her subjects reported fearing that race might someday undermine their success, and others spoke of a race-based "glass ceiling" preventing them from reaching the highest positions in our society. Benjamin concluded that despite the improving social standing of African Americans, black people in the United States still feel the sting of racial hostility.



Do you think this research could have been carried out by a white sociologist? Why or why not?



tip

Throughout this book, you will find tables and figures that summarize data collected about various populations. Most of these data are collected by the government, typically by researchers using questionnaires.



tip

In her study of the African American elite, Lois Benjamin made great effort to explain who her subjects were. Always consider this question when reading anyone's research results.



Thinking About Diversity: Race, Class, & Gender

The African American Elite: Reading Data in a Table

The sociologist Lois Benjamin completed an important study of the African American elite. Who are these people? An easy way for a researcher to answer this question is to provide a table. A table provides a lot of information in a small amount of space, so learning to read tables can increase your reading efficiency.

When you are reading a study and you spot a table, look first at the title to see what information it contains. The title of the table presented here tells you that it provides a profile of the 100 subjects participating in Lois Benjamin's research. Across the top of the table, you see eight variables that describe these men and women. Reading down each column, note the different categories, with the percentages adding up to 100.

Starting at the top left, we see that Benjamin's sample was mostly men (63 percent men, 37 percent women). In terms of age, most of the respondents (68 percent) were in the middle stage of life, and most had grown up in a predominantly black community in the South or in the North or Midwest region of the United States.

Most of these individuals have a lot of schooling. Half earned either a doctorate (32 percent) or a medical or law degree (17 percent). Given their extensive education (and Benjamin's own job as a professor), we should not be surprised that the largest share (35 percent) worked in academic institutions. In terms of income, these people were pretty well off, and most (64 percent) earned more than \$50,000 a year back in the 1980s (a salary that only 33 percent of full-time workers make even today).

Finally, we see that these 100 individuals were generally left-of-center in their political views. In part, this reflects their extensive schooling (which encourages progressive thinking) and the tendency of academics to fall on the liberal side of the political spectrum.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Why are statistical data, such as those in this table, an efficient way to convey lots of information?
2. Looking at the table, can you determine how long it took most people to become part of this elite? Explain your answer.
3. Do you see any ways in which this African American elite might differ from a comparable white elite? If so, what are they?

The Talented One Hundred: Lois Benjamin's African American Elite

Sex	Age	Childhood Racial Setting	Childhood Region	Highest Educational Degree	Job Sector	Income	Political Orientation
Male 63%	35 or younger 6%	Mostly black 71%	West 6%	Doctorate 32%	College or university 35%	More than \$50,000 64%	Radical left 13%
Female 37%	36 to 54 68%	Mostly white 15%	North or Midwest 32%	Medical or law 17%	Private for-profit 17%	\$35,000 to \$50,000 18%	Liberal 38%
	55 or older 26%	Racially mixed 14%	South 38%	Master's 27%	Private nonprofit 9%	\$20,000 to \$34,999 12%	Moderate 28%
			Northeast 12%	Bachelor's 13%	Government 22%	Less than \$20,000 6%	Conservative 5%
			Other 12%	Less 11%	Self-employed 14%		Depends on issue 14%
				Retired 3%			Unknown 2%
100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Adapted from Lois Benjamin, *The Black Elite: Facing the Color Line in the Twilight of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1991), p. 276.



tip

If the experiment comes closest to the logic of science, participant observation is the method that is used by sociologists engaged in interpretive sociology.



tip

As you read about *Street Corner Society*, notice how participant observation is a great method for understanding everyday life in a social setting.



Participant observation is a method of sociological research that we can apply in our everyday lives. Every time we find ourselves in an interesting social setting, we can try to determine what people are doing and what meaning they find in their actions.

In the Field: Participant Observation

Lois Benjamin’s research demonstrates that sociological investigation takes place not only in laboratories but also “in the field,” that is, where people carry on their everyday lives. The most widely used strategy for field study is **participant observation**, a research method in which investigators systematically observe people while joining them in their routine activities.

Participant observation allows researchers an inside look at social life in settings ranging from nightclubs to religious seminaries. Cultural anthropologists commonly use participant observation (which they call *fieldwork*) to study communities in other societies. They term their descriptions of unfamiliar cultures *ethnographies*. Sociologists prefer to call their accounts of people in particular settings *case studies*.

At the beginning of a field study, most investigators do not have a specific hypothesis in mind. In fact, they may not yet realize what the important questions will turn out to be. Thus most field research is *exploratory* and *descriptive*.

As its name suggests, participant observation has two sides. On one hand, getting an “insider’s” look depends on becoming a participant in the setting—“hanging out” with the research subjects, trying

to act, think, and even feel the way they do. Compared to experiments and survey research, participant observation has fewer hard-and-fast rules. But it is precisely this flexibility that allows investigators to explore the unfamiliar and adapt to the unexpected.

Unlike other research methods, participant observation may require that the researcher enter the setting not just for a week or two but for months or even years. At the same time, however, the researcher must maintain some distance as an “observer,” mentally stepping back to record field notes and later to interpret them. Because the investigator must both “play the participant” to win acceptance and gain access to people’s lives and “play the observer” to maintain the distance needed for thoughtful analysis, there is an inherent tension in this method. Carrying out the twin roles of insider participant and outsider observer often comes down to a series of careful compromises.

Most sociologists carry out participant observation alone, so they—and readers, too—must remember that the results depend on the work of a single person. Participant observation usually falls within interpretive sociology, yielding mostly qualitative data—the researcher’s accounts of people’s lives and what they think of themselves and the world around them—although researchers sometimes collect some quantitative (numerical) data. From a scientific point of view, participant observation is a “soft” method that relies heavily on personal judgment and lacks scientific rigor. Yet its personal approach is also a strength: A highly visible team of sociologists attempting to administer formal surveys would disrupt many social settings, but a single skillful participant-observer can often gain a lot of insight into people’s natural behavior.



YOUR LEARNING What are several strengths of participant observation? What are several weaknesses of this research method?

Illustration of Participant Observation: *Street Corner Society*

In the late 1930s, a young graduate student at Harvard University named William Foote Whyte (1914–2000) was fascinated by the lively street life of a nearby, rather rundown section of Boston. His curiosity led him to carry out four years of participant observation in this neighborhood, which he called “Cornerville,” and in the process to produce a sociological classic.

At the time, Cornerville was home to first- and second-generation Italian immigrants. Many were poor, and many people living in the rest of Boston considered Cornerville a place to avoid: a poor slum that was home to racketeers. Unwilling to accept easy stereotypes, Whyte set out to discover for himself exactly what kind of life went on in this community. His celebrated book, *Street Corner Society* (1981, orig. 1943), describes Cornerville as a complex community with a distinctive code of values and its own social conflicts.



tip

Participant observation requires a lot of time but little money or specialized equipment. For that reason, this method is often chosen by students in college or graduate school.

In beginning his investigation, Whyte considered a range of research methods. Should he take questionnaires to one of Cornerville's community centers and ask local people to fill them out? Should he invite members of the community to come to his Harvard office for interviews? It is easy to see that such formal strategies would have gained little cooperation from the local people. Whyte decided, therefore, to set out on his own, working his way into Cornerville life in the hope of coming to understand this rather mysterious place.

Right away, Whyte discovered the challenges of even getting started in field research. After all, an upper-middle-class WASP graduate student from Harvard did not exactly fit into Cornerville life. Even a friendly overture from an outsider could seem pushy and rude. One night, Whyte dropped in at a local bar, hoping to buy a woman a drink and encourage her to talk about Cornerville. Looking around the room, he could find no woman alone. But then he saw a man sitting down with two women. He walked up to them and asked, "Pardon me. Would you mind if I joined you?" Instantly, he realized his mistake:

There was a moment of silence while the man stared at me. Then he offered to throw me down the stairs. I assured him that this would not be necessary, and demonstrated as much by walking right out of there without any assistance. (1981:289)

As this incident suggests, gaining entry to a community is the difficult (and sometimes hazardous) first step in field research. "Breaking in" requires patience, quick thinking, and a little luck. Whyte's big break came when he met a young man named "Doc" at a local social service agency. Whyte explained to Doc how hard it was to make friends in Cornerville. Doc responded by taking Whyte under his wing and introducing him to others in the community. With Doc's help, Whyte soon became a neighborhood regular.

Whyte's friendship with Doc illustrates the importance of a *key informant* in field research. Such people not only introduce a researcher to a community but often remain a source of information and help. But using a key informant also has its risks. Because any person has a particular circle of friends, a key informant's guidance is certain to "spin" or bias the study in one way or another. In addition, in the eyes of others, the reputation of the key informant—good or bad—usually rubs off on the investigator. So although a key informant is helpful early on, a participant-observer must soon seek a broader range of contacts.

Having entered the Cornerville world, Whyte quickly learned another lesson: A field researcher needs to know when to speak up and when to shut up. One evening, he joined a group discussing neighborhood gambling. Wanting to get the facts straight, Whyte asked innocently, "I suppose the cops were all paid off?" In a heartbeat, "the gambler's jaw dropped. He glared at me. Then he denied

vehemently that any policeman had been paid off and immediately switched the conversation to another subject. For the rest of that evening I felt very uncomfortable." The next day, Doc offered some sound advice:

"Go easy on that 'who,' 'what,' 'why,' 'when,' 'where' stuff, Bill.

You ask those questions and people will clam up on you. If people accept you, you can just hang around, and you'll learn the answers in the long run without even having to ask the questions." (1981:303)

In the months and years that followed, Whyte became familiar with life in Cornerville and even married a local woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life. In the process, he learned that the common stereotypes were wrong. In Cornerville, most people worked hard, many were quite successful, and some even boasted of sending children to college. Even today, Whyte's book is a fascinating story of the deeds, dreams, and disappointments of immigrants and their children living in one ethnic community, and it contains the kind of rich details that come only from years of participant observation.



Can you think of a topic you might be interested in studying as a participant-observer?

Using Available Data: Existing Sources

Not all research requires investigators to collect their own data. Sometimes sociologists analyze existing sources, data collected by others.

The most widely used statistics in social science are gathered by government agencies. The U.S. Census Bureau continuously updates a wide range of data about the U.S. population. Comparable data on Canada are available from Statistics Canada, a branch of that nation's government. For international data, there are various publications of the United Nations and the World Bank. In short, data about the whole world are as close as your library or the Internet.

Using available data—whether government statistics or the findings of individual researchers—saves time and money. This approach has special appeal to sociologists with low budgets. For anyone, however, government data are generally more extensive and more accurate than what most researchers could obtain on their own.

But using existing data has problems of its own. For one thing, available data may not exist in the exact form needed. For example, you may be able to find the average salary paid to professors at your school but not separate figures for the amounts paid to women and



tip

Using existing sources has two key advantages: (1) obtaining good-quality data without having to collect them yourself and (2) allowing researchers to study the past, where no direct data collection is possible.



get it right

Using existing sources—especially in clever and creative ways, as Baltzell did—is the key to conducting historical research in sociology.

to men. Further, there are always questions about the meaning and accuracy of work done by others. For example, in his classic study of suicide, Emile Durkheim soon discovered that there was no way to know whether a death classified as a suicide was really an accident or vice versa. In addition, various agencies use different procedures and categories in collecting data, so comparisons may be difficult. In the end, then, using existing data is a little like shopping for a used car: There are plenty of bargains out there, but you have to shop carefully.


 **YOUR LEARNING** What are some advantages of using existing data? What are some dangers?

Illustration of the Use of Existing Sources: A Tale of Two Cities

To people stuck in the present, existing data can be used as a key to unlock secrets of the past. The award-winning study *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia*, by E. Digby Baltzell (1979b), is a good example of how a researcher can use available data to do historical research.

This story starts with Baltzell making a chance visit to Bowdoin College in Maine. As he walked into the college library, he saw up on the wall three large portraits—of the celebrated author Nathaniel Hawthorne, the famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Franklin Pierce, the fourteenth president of the United States. He soon learned that all three great men had been members of the same class at Bowdoin, graduating in 1825. How could it be, Baltzell wondered, that this small college had graduated more famous people in a single year than his own, much bigger University of Pennsylvania had graduated in its entire history? To answer this question, Baltzell was soon paging through historical documents to see whether New England had really produced more famous people than his native Pennsylvania.

What were Baltzell's data? He turned to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, twenty volumes profiling more than 13,000 outstanding men and women in fields such as politics, law, and the arts. The dictionary told Baltzell *who* was great, and he realized that the longer the biography, the more important the person is thought to be.

By the time Baltzell had identified the seventy-five individuals with the longest biographies, he saw a striking pattern. Massachusetts had the most by far, with twenty-one of the seventy-five top achievers. The New England states, combined, claimed thirty-one of the entries. By contrast, Pennsylvania could boast of only two, and all the states in the Middle Atlantic region had just twelve. Looking more closely, Baltzell discovered that most of New England's great achievers had grown up in and around the city of Boston. Again, in stark

contrast, almost no one of comparable standing came from his own Philadelphia, a city with many more people than Boston.

What could explain this remarkable pattern? Baltzell drew inspiration from the German sociologist Max Weber (1958, orig. 1904–05), who argued that a region's record of achievement was influenced by its major religious beliefs (see Chapter 4, "Society"). In the religious differences between Boston and Philadelphia, Baltzell found the answer to his puzzle. Boston was originally a Puritan settlement, founded by people who highly valued the pursuit of excellence and public achievement. Philadelphia, by contrast, was settled by Quakers, who believed in equality and avoided public notice.

Both the Puritans and the Quakers were fleeing religious persecution in England, but the two religions produced quite different cultural patterns. Boston's Puritans saw humans as innately sinful, so they built a rigid society in which family, church, and school regulated people's behavior. The Puritans celebrated hard work as a means of glorifying God and viewed public success as a reassuring sign of God's blessing. In short, Puritanism fostered a disciplined life in which people both sought and respected achievement.

Philadelphia's Quakers, by contrast, built their way of life on the belief that all human beings are basically good. They saw little need for strong social institutions to "save" people from sinfulness. They believed in equality, so that even those who became rich considered themselves no better than anyone else. Thus rich and poor alike lived modestly and discouraged one another from standing out by seeking fame or even running for public office.

In Baltzell's sociological imagination, Boston and Philadelphia took the form of two social "test tubes": Puritanism was poured into one, Quakerism into the other. Centuries later, we can see that different "chemical reactions" occurred in each case. The two belief systems led to different attitudes toward personal achievement, which in turn shaped the history of each region. Today, we can see that Boston's Kennedys (despite being Catholic) are only one of that city's many families who exemplify the Puritan pursuit of recognition and leadership. By contrast, there has never been even one family with such public stature in the entire history of Philadelphia.

Baltzell's study uses scientific logic, but it also illustrates the interpretive approach by showing how people understood their world. His research reminds us that sociological investigation often involves mixing research orientations to fit a particular problem.



Why is the use of existing sources especially important in doing historical research? What other questions might you wish to answer using existing sources?



tip

Study this Summing Up table to be sure you understand both the type of research issue that calls for each of the four methods of data collection and the strengths and limitations of each method.

SUMMING UP

Four Research Methods

	Experiment	Survey	Participant Observation	Existing Sources
Application	For explanatory research that specifies relationships between variables Generates quantitative data	For gathering information about issues that cannot be directly observed, such as attitudes and values Useful for descriptive and explanatory research Generates quantitative or qualitative data	For exploratory and descriptive study of people in a "natural" setting Generates qualitative data	For exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory research whenever suitable data are available
Advantages	Provides the greatest opportunity to specify cause-and-effect relationships Replication of research is relatively easy	Sampling, using questionnaires, allows surveys of large populations Interviews provide in-depth responses	Allows study of "natural" behavior Usually inexpensive	Saves time and expense of data collection Makes historical research possible
Limitations	Laboratory settings have an artificial quality Unless the research environment is carefully controlled, results may be biased	Questionnaires must be carefully prepared and may yield a low return rate Interviews are expensive and time-consuming	Time-consuming Replication of research is difficult Researcher must balance roles of participant and observer	Researcher has no control over possible biases in data Data may only partially fit current research needs

The Summing Up table provides a quick review of the four major methods of sociological investigation. We now turn to our final consideration: the link between research results and sociological theory.

The Interplay of Theory and Method

No matter how sociologists collect their data, they have to turn facts into meaning by building theory. They do this in two ways: inductive logical thought and deductive logical thought.

Inductive logical thought is reasoning that transforms specific observations into general theory. In this mode, a researcher's thinking runs from the specific to the general and goes something like this: "I have some interesting data here; I wonder what they mean?" Baltzell's research illustrates the inductive logical model. His data showed that one region of the country (the Boston area) had produced many more high achievers than another (the Philadelphia region). He worked "upward" from ground-level observations to the high-flying theory

that religious values were a key factor in shaping people's attitudes toward achievement.

A second type of logical thought moves "downward," in the opposite direction: **Deductive logical thought** is reasoning that transforms general theory into specific hypotheses suitable for testing. The researcher's thinking runs from the general to the specific: "I have this hunch about human behavior; let's collect some data and put it to the test." Working deductively, the researcher first states the theory in the form of a hypothesis and then selects a method by which to test it. To the extent that the data support the hypothesis, we conclude that the theory is correct; if the data refute the hypothesis, we know that the theory needs to be revised or perhaps rejected entirely.

Philip Zimbardo's "Stanford County Prison" experiment illustrates deductive logic. Zimbardo began with the general theory that a social environment can change human behavior. He then developed a specific, testable hypothesis: Placed in a prison setting, even emotionally well-balanced young men will behave violently. The violence that erupted soon after his experiment began supported Zimbardo's



tip

The ten steps listed on the next two pages are a summary of what is needed to conduct good sociological research.



Controversy & Debate

Can People Lie with Statistics?

JOSH: (continuing a discussion about job prospects after graduation) Well, you know, college students today just aren't as smart as they were fifty years ago.

SAM: Come on, that's not true at all.

JOSH: (smugly) Sorry, pal. I happen to have the data to prove it.

We have all been in arguments when someone has presented us with "data" as if that were "proof." But are numbers the same as "truth"? It is worth remembering the words of the nineteenth-century English politician Benjamin Disraeli, who once remarked, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics!"

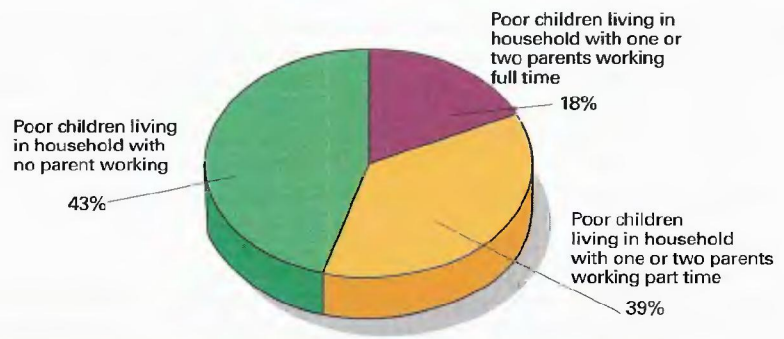
In a world that bombards us with numbers—often described as "scientific data" or "official figures"—it is important to realize that "statistical evidence" is not necessarily the same as truth. For one thing, any researcher can make mistakes. More important, because data do not speak for themselves, someone has to decide what they mean. Sometimes people (even sociologists) "dress up" their data almost the way politicians deliver campaign speeches—with an eye more to winning you over than to getting at the truth.

The best way to avoid being fooled is to understand how people can mislead with statistics.

1. People select their data. Many times, the data presented are not wrong, but they do not tell the whole story. Let's say someone who thinks that television is ruining our way of life presents statistics indicating that we watch more TV today than people did a generation ago. It also turns out that during the same period, College Board scores have fallen. Both sets of data may be correct, but the suggestion that there is a cause-and-effect

link here—that television viewing is lowering test scores—is not proved. A person more favorable to television might counter with the additional "fact" that the U.S. population spends much more money buying books today than it did a generation ago, suggesting that television creates new intellectual interests. It is possible to find statistics that seem to support just about any argument.

2. People interpret their data. People can also "package" their data with a ready-made interpretation, as if the numbers can mean only one thing. Take a look at



hypothesis. Had his experiment produced friendly behavior between prisoners and guards, his hypothesis clearly would have been wrong.

Just as researchers often employ several methods over the course of one study, they typically use *both* kinds of logical thought. Figure 2–2 on page 52 illustrates both types of reasoning: inductively building theory from observations and deductively making observations to test a theory.

Finally, turning facts into meaning usually involves organizing and presenting statistical data. Precisely how sociologists arrange their numbers affects the conclusions they reach. In short, preparing your results amounts to spinning reality in one way or another.

Often we conclude that an argument must be true simply because there are statistics to back it up. However, we must look

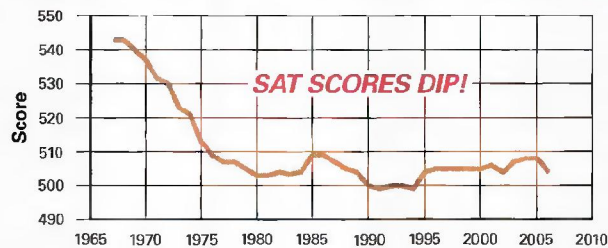
at statistics with a cautious eye. After all, researchers choose what data to present, they interpret their statistics, and they may use tables and graphs to steer readers toward particular conclusions. The Controversy & Debate box takes a closer look at this important issue.

Putting It All Together: Ten Steps in Sociological Investigation

We can summarize this chapter by outlining ten steps in the process of carrying out sociological investigation. Each step takes the form of an important question.

✓ get it right

We often think data prove a point. Not so, as the box below explains. Be sure you understand why.



the pie chart, which shows the results of one study of U.S. children living in poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty, cited in *Population Today*, 1995). The researchers reported that 43 percent of these children lived in a household with no working parent, 39 percent lived in a household with one or two parents employed part time, and 18 percent lived in a household with one or two parents working full time. The researchers labeled this figure “Majority of Children in Poverty Live with Parents Who Work.” Do you think this interpretation is accurate or misleading? Why or why not?

3. People use graphs to spin the truth.

Especially in newspapers and other popular media, we find statistics in the form

of charts and graphs. Graphs, which often show an upward or downward trend over time, are a good way to present data. But using graphs also gives people the opportunity to “spin” data in various ways. The trend depends in part on the time frame used. During the past ten years, for instance, the U.S. crime rate has fallen. But if we were to look at the past fifty years, we would see an opposite trend: The crime rate pushed sharply upward.

The scale used to draw a graph is also important because it lets a researcher “inflate” or “deflate” a trend. Both graphs shown here present identical data for College Board SAT critical reading scores between 1967 and 2006. But the left-hand graph stretches the scale to show a downward trend; the right-hand

graph compresses the scale, showing a steady trend. So understanding what statistics mean—or don’t mean—depends on being a careful reader!

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. **What is your topic?** Being curious and applying the sociological perspective can generate ideas for social research at any time and in any place. Pick a topic you find important to study.
2. **What have others already learned?** You are probably not the first person with an interest in the issue you have selected. Visit the library to see what theories and methods other researchers have applied to your topic. In reviewing the existing research, note problems that have come up to avoid repeating past mistakes.
3. **What, exactly, are your questions?** Are you seeking to explore an unfamiliar social setting? To describe some category of people? To investigate cause and effect among variables? If your study is exploratory or descriptive, identify *whom* you wish to study, *where* the research will take place, and *what* kinds of issues you want to explore. If it is explanatory, you must also formulate the hypothesis to be tested and operationalize each variable.
4. **What will you need to carry out research?** How much time and money are available to you? Is special equipment or training necessary? Can you do the work yourself? You should answer all these questions as you plan the research project.
5. **Are there ethical concerns?** Not all research raises serious ethical questions, but you must be sensitive to this possibility.

✓ get it right

Both inductive thought and deductive thought are ways of linking theory and facts. The former begins with facts and works “upward” toward theory; the latter begins with theory and works “downward” by testing the theory against facts gathered by doing research. In reality, any researcher is likely to combine these two types of thinking.



tip

The Applying Sociology in Everyday Life items provide additional ways for you to connect the ideas found in this chapter with your own life.

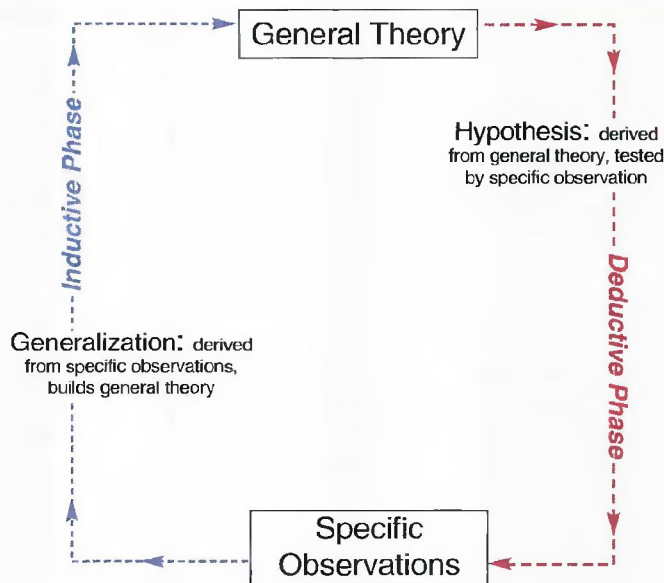


FIGURE 2–2 Deductive and Inductive Logical Thought

Sociologists link theory and method through both inductive and deductive logic.

Can the research cause harm or threaten anyone’s privacy? How might you design the study to minimize the chances for injury? Will you promise anonymity to the subjects? If so, how will you ensure that anonymity is maintained?

6. **What method will you use?** Consider all major research strategies, as well as combinations of approaches. Keep

in mind that the best method depends on the kinds of questions you are asking as well as the resources available to you.

7. **How will you record the data?** Your research method is a plan for data collection. Record all information accurately and in a way that will make sense later (it may be some time before you actually write up the results of your work). Be alert for any bias that may creep into the research.
8. **What do the data tell you?** Study the data in terms of your initial questions and decide how to interpret the data you have collected. If your study involves a specific hypothesis, you must decide whether to confirm, reject, or modify the hypothesis. Keep in mind that there may be several ways to look at your data, depending on which theoretical approach you use, and you should consider all interpretations.
9. **What are your conclusions?** Prepare a final report stating your conclusions. How does your work advance sociological theory? Does it suggest ways to improve research methods? Does your study have policy implications? What would the general public find interesting in your work? Finally, evaluate your own work, noting problems that arose and questions that were left unanswered.
10. **How can you share what you’ve learned?** Consider sending your research paper to a campus newspaper or magazine or making a presentation to a class, a campus gathering, or perhaps a meeting of professional sociologists. The point is to share what you have learned with others and to let them respond to your work.

Applying Sociology in Everyday Life

1. Observe your instructor in class one day to grade his or her teaching skills. Operationalize the concept “good teaching” in terms of specific traits you can measure. How easy is it to measure “good teaching”?
2. Visit three sociology instructors (or other social science instructors) during their office hours. Ask each whether they think sociology is an objective science. Do they agree? Why or why not?
3. Select a number of primetime television shows, and note the race of major characters. You will have to decide what “prime-time” means, what a “major” character is, how to gauge someone’s “race,” and other issues before you begin. Sketch out a research plan to evaluate the hypothesis that African Americans are not very visible on primetime television.

MAKING THE GRADE

CHAPTER 2 Sociological Investigation



Basics of Sociological Investigation

Two basic requirements for **SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION** are

- Know how to apply the sociological perspective.
- Be curious and ready to ask questions about the world around you.

p 28

What people accept as “truth” differs around the world.

- **SCIENCE**—a logical system that bases knowledge on direct, systematic observation—is one form of truth.
- Scientific evidence gained from sociological research often challenges common sense.

pp 29–30

science (p. 29) a logical system that bases knowledge on direct, systematic observation
empirical evidence (p. 29) information we can verify with our senses

Research Orientations: Three Ways to Do Sociology

SCIENTIFIC SOCIOLOGY studies society by systematically observing social behavior.

Scientific sociology

- requires carefully operationalizing variables and ensuring that measurement is both reliable and valid;
- observes how variables are related and tries to establish cause and effect;
- sees an objective reality “out there”;
- favors quantitative data;
- is well suited to research in a laboratory;
- demands that researchers try to be objective and suspend their personal values and biases as they conduct research.

✓ Scientific sociology is also called *positivist sociology*.

pp 30–36

INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY focuses on the meanings that people attach to behavior.

Interpretive sociology

- sees reality as constructed by people in the course of their everyday lives;
- favors qualitative data;
- is well suited to research in a natural setting.

✓ Weber’s concept of *Verstehen* refers to learning how people understand their world.

pp 36–37

CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY uses research to bring about social change.

Critical sociology

- asks moral and political questions;
- focuses on inequality;
- rejects the principle of objectivity, claiming that all research is political.

✓ Marx, who founded the critical orientation, criticized scientific sociology as supporting the status quo.

p 37

Research Orientations and Theory

- Scientific sociology is loosely linked to the structural–functional approach.
- Interpretive sociology is related to the symbolic–interaction approach.
- Critical sociology corresponds to the social–conflict approach.

pp 37–38

☐ See the Summing Up table on page 38.

scientific sociology (p. 30) the study of society based on systematic observation of social behavior

concept (p. 30) a mental construct that represents some part of the world in a simplified form

variable (p. 30) a concept whose value changes from case to case

measurement (p. 30) a procedure for determining the value of a variable in a specific case

operationalize a variable (p. 32) specifying exactly what is to be measured before assigning a value to a variable

reliability (p. 33) consistency in measurement

validity (p. 33) actually measuring exactly what you intend to measure

cause and effect (p. 33) a relationship in which change in one variable causes change in another

independent variable (p. 33) the variable that causes the change

dependent variable (p. 33) the variable that changes

correlation (p. 33) a relationship in which two (or more) variables change together

spurious correlation (p. 34) an apparent but false relationship between two (or more) variables that is caused by some other variable

control (p. 34) holding constant all variables except one in order to see clearly the effect of that variable

objectivity (p. 35) personal neutrality in conducting research

replication (p. 35) repetition of research by other investigators

interpretive sociology (p. 37) the study of society that focuses on the meanings people attach to their social world

critical sociology (p. 37) the study of society that focuses on the need for social change

MAKING THE GRADE *continued . . .*



Gender and Research

Gender, involving both researcher and subjects, can affect research in five ways:

- androcentricity
- overgeneralizing
- gender blindness
- double standards
- interference

p 38

Research Ethics

Researchers must

- protect the privacy of subjects
- obtain the informed consent of subjects
- indicate all sources of funding
- submit research to an institutional review board (IRB) to ensure it doesn't violate ethical standards

p 39

gender (p. 38) the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being female or male

Methods: Strategies for Doing Research

The **EXPERIMENT** allows researchers to study cause and effect between two or more variables in a controlled setting.

- Researchers conduct an experiment to test a **hypothesis**, a statement of a possible relationship between two (or more) variables.
- ✓ Example of an experiment: Zimbardo's "Stanford County Prison"

pp 39–42

SURVEY research uses questionnaires or interviews to gather subjects' responses to a series of questions.

- Surveys typically yield descriptive findings, painting a picture of people's views on some issue.
- ✓ Example of a survey: Benjamin's "Talented One Hundred"

pp 42–45

Through **PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**, researchers join with people in a social setting for an extended period of time.

- Participant observation, also called fieldwork, allows researchers an "inside look" at a social setting. Because researchers are not attempting to test a specific hypothesis, their research is exploratory and descriptive.
- ✓ Example of participant observation: Whyte's *Street Corner Society*

pp 46–47

Sometimes researchers analyze **EXISTING SOURCES**, data collected by others.

- Using existing sources, especially the widely available data collected by government agencies, can save researchers time and money.
- Existing sources are the basis of historical research.
- ✓ Example of using existing sources: Baltzell's *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia*

pp 47–48

research method (p. 39) a systematic plan for doing research

experiment (p. 39) a research method for investigating cause and effect under highly controlled conditions

hypothesis (p. 39) a statement of a possible relationship between two (or more) variables

Hawthorne effect (p. 41) a change in a subject's behavior caused simply by the awareness of being studied

survey (p. 42) a research method in which subjects respond to a series of statements or questions in a questionnaire or an interview

population (p. 42) the people who are the focus of research

sample (p. 42) a part of a population that represents the whole

questionnaire (p. 42) a series of written questions a researcher presents to subjects

interview (p. 43) a series of questions a researcher asks respondents in person

participant observation (p. 46) a research method in which investigators systematically observe people while joining them in their routine activities

inductive logical thought (p. 49) reasoning that transforms specific observations into general theory

deductive logical thought (p. 49) reasoning that transforms general theory into specific hypotheses suitable for testing

☐ See the Summing Up table on page 49.

✓ Which method the researcher uses depends on the question being asked.

✓ Researchers combine these methods depending on the specific goals of their study.

Sample Test Questions

These questions are similar to those found in the test bank that accompanies this textbook.

Multiple-Choice Questions

- Science is defined as**
 - a logical system that bases knowledge on direct, systematic observation.
 - belief based on faith in some ultimate truth.
 - knowledge based on a society's traditions.
 - information that comes from recognized "experts."
- Empirical evidence refers to**
 - quantitative rather than qualitative data.
 - what people consider "common sense."
 - information people can verify with their senses.
 - patterns found in every known society.
- When trying to measure people's "social class," you would have to keep in mind that**
 - your measurement can never be both reliable and valid.
 - there are many ways to operationalize this variable.
 - there is no way to measure "social class."
 - in the United States, everyone agrees on what "social class" means.
- What is the term for the value that occurs most often in a series of numbers?**
 - the mode
 - the median
 - the mean
 - All of the above are correct.
- When measuring any variable, reliability refers to**
 - whether you are really measuring what you want to measure.
 - how dependable the researcher is.
 - results that everyone would agree with.
 - whether repeating the measurement yields consistent results.
- We can correctly say that two variables are correlated if**
 - change in one causes no change in the other.
 - one occurs before the other.
 - their values vary together.
 - both measure the same thing.
- Which of the following is *not* one of the defining traits of a cause-and-effect relationship?**
 - The independent variable must happen before the dependent variable.
 - Each variable must be shown to be independent of the other.
 - The two variables must display correlation.
 - There must be no evidence that the correlation is spurious.
- Interpretive sociology is a research orientation that**
 - focuses on action.
 - sees an objective reality "out there."
 - focuses on the meanings people attach to behavior.
 - seeks to increase social justice.
- To study the effects on test performance of playing soft music during an exam, a researcher conducts an experiment in which one test-taking class hears music and another does not. According to the chapter discussion of the experiment, the class hearing the music is called**
 - the placebo.
 - the control group.
 - the dependent variable.
 - the experimental group.
- In participant observation, the problem of "breaking in" to a setting is often solved with the help of a**
 - key informant.
 - research assistant.
 - bigger budget.
 - All of the above are correct.

ANSWERS: 1 (a); 2 (c); 3 (b); 4 (a); 5 (d); 6 (c); 7 (b); 8 (c); 9 (d); 10 (a)

Essay Questions

- Explain the idea that there are various types of truth. What are the advantages and limitations of science as a way of discovering truth?
- Compare and contrast scientific sociology, interpretive sociology, and critical sociology. Which of these approaches best describes the work of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx?

