

Chapter 1: The Sociological Perspective

Chapter Summary

Sociology offers a perspective, a view of the world. The sociological perspective opens a window into unfamiliar worlds and offers a fresh look at familiar worlds. Sociologists study the broader social contexts that underlie human behavior. These include the social groups that influence human behavior and the larger society that organizes it.

The sociological perspective is an approach to understanding human behavior by placing it within its broader social context. C. Wright Mills referred to the sociological perspective as the intersection of biography (the individual) and history (social factors that influence the individual).

Sociology is one of several disciplines referred to as a “social science.” As the term implies, social sciences address the social world. The natural sciences, on the other hand, are the intellectual and academic disciplines designed to explain and predict the events in the natural environment. The other social sciences include anthropology, economics, political science, and psychology.

As a scientific discipline, sociology seeks to explain why something happens, attempts to make generalizations that can be applied to a broader group or situation, and predicts what will happen based on the knowledge received. Sociology specifically seeks to explain the causes of human behavior and to recognize the patterns of human behavior. It also seeks to predict the future behavior of people. Although sociologists usually do not make decisions on how society should be changed or people treated, sociologists provide valuable research data that can be used by authorities who do make such decisions.

Sociology grew out of the social, political, economic, and technological revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Industrial Revolution, in particular, eroded old traditions and necessitated new ways of perceiving and examining the social world. With the success of the natural sciences serving as a model for the social sciences, sociology emerged in Western Europe as a distinct discipline in the mid-1800s.

Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber were early thinkers in the development of sociology. The idea of applying the scientific method to the social world, known as positivism, was first proposed by Auguste Comte. Based on this innovation and Comte’s effort to apply the scientific method to social life, he is credited as being the founder of sociology. Herbert Spencer, one of the most dominant and influential English sociologists, is often called the “second founder of sociology.” Spencer’s concept of Social Darwinism suggested that societies evolve from primitive to civilized and that the “fittest” societies evolve and survive, while unfit societies become extinct.

Max Weber advocated *Verstehen*, the German term for “grasp by insight,” to understanding why people act as they do. In contrast, Emile Durkheim believed that sociologists should focus primarily on uncovering social facts—the objective social conditions that influence people’s behaviors. *Verstehen* and social facts are not mutually exclusive types of social research. Contemporary sociologists often employ both approaches to examine and understand the social contexts that underlie human behavior.

The early history of sociology in North America was characterized by a debate over whether sociology should analyze or reform society. Early sociology programs were initiated at the University of Kansas in 1890, the University of Chicago in 1892, and Atlanta University in 1897. Albion Small, George Herbert Mead, Robert E. Park, and Ernest Burgess were among the first academicians to dedicate their professional careers to the

development of sociological theory. W.E.B. DuBois, the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University, was a social critic and dedicated his life to analyzing and writing about social injustice.

During the 1940s, the emphasis in American sociology shifted from social reform to social theory. “Grand theorists,” such as Talcott Parsons, developed detailed, abstract models of how the complex parts of society harmoniously functioned together. Although this helped to legitimize sociology as a “science,” it did little to critique, reform, and/or help to change the social injustices in society. C. Wright Mills’ influential analysis of “the power elite”—a small group of business, political, and military leaders whose monopoly on power threatens freedom—helped to shift sociology back toward social reform in the 1960s and 1970s.

Many sociologists continue to disagree over the proper uses of social research. Some sociologists practice basic (or pure) sociology, while others practice applied sociology. Whether one practices basic or applied sociology, a primary goal of social research is to separate fact from fiction, while examining the links between what people do and the social settings that help shape their behavior. The current state of sociology encompasses social analysis and social reform, with a growing emphasis on applied sociology—a sort of middle ground that, rather than focusing on large and/or radical social change, uses sociological analysis to help solve problems in a specific setting.

Central to the study of any science is the development of theory. A theory is a general statement about how parts of the world fit together, relate to one another, and affect each other. Sociologists use three major theories—symbolic interactionism, functional analysis, and conflict theory—to observe and interpret social contexts, relationships, and realities in distinct ways. Symbolic interactionism analyzes how people use symbols to develop and share their view of the world. Focusing on the micro level, it studies the different ways that individuals and small groups create, disseminate, and/or interpret “reality” through their everyday, face-to-face interactions. Functional analysis examines how the various parts of society work together to fulfill their respective functions and, consequently, create a harmonious society.

Focusing on the macro level, it also looks at how parts of society occasionally dysfunction, negatively affecting other parts of society and, consequently, contributing to a more unstable society. Conflict theory views the social world in terms of competing groups struggling over scarce resources. Also focusing on the macro level, conflict theory examines how groups of people with power maintain and/or impose their power, and how groups of people without power work to acquire power.

In an effort to pursue a social reform agenda, the American Sociological Association is now promoting “public sociology” with the goal of influencing politicians, public officials, and policy makers.

As the world becomes more globally connected, American sociology is likely to expand its current horizons: incorporating new perspectives and worldviews that include—and encompass—global issues and concerns.

Chapter Outline

I. The Sociological Perspective

- A. This perspective is important because it provides a different way of looking at familiar worlds. It allows us to gain a new vision of social life.
- B. This perspective stresses the broader social context of behavior by looking at individuals’ social location—employment, income, education, gender, age, and race—and by considering external influences—people’s experiences—which are internalized and become part of a person’s thinking and motivations. We are able to see the links between what people do and the social settings that shape their behavior.
- C. This perspective enables us to analyze and understand both the forces that contribute to the emergence and growth of the global village and our unique experiences in our own smaller corners of this village.

II. Sociology and the Other Sciences

- A. Science is the systematic methods used to obtain knowledge and the knowledge obtained by those methods. It can be divided into the natural sciences and the social sciences. Sociology is defined as “the scientific study of society and human behavior.”
- B. The natural sciences attempt to comprehend, explain, and predict events in our natural environment.
- C. Social sciences attempt to objectively study the social world. Like the natural sciences, the social sciences are divided into specialized fields based on their subject matter.
 - 1. Anthropology is the sister discipline of sociology that attempts to understand culture (a people’s total way of life) by focusing primarily on tribal people. This is giving way though to study of groups in industrialized settings.
 - 2. Economics analyzes the production, distribution, and allocation of the material goods and services of a society.
 - 3. Political science focuses on politics or government.
 - 4. Psychology concentrates on processes that occur within the individual.
 - 5. Sociology is similar to the other social sciences in some ways, but it is distinct because it looks at all social institutions, focuses on industrialized societies, and looks at external factors which influence people.
- D. All sciences have certain goals.
 - 1. The first goal is to explain *why* something happens.
 - 2. The second goal is to make generalizations by looking for patterns, recurring characteristics, or events.
 - 3. The third goal is to predict what will happen in the future, given current knowledge.
- E. To achieve these goals, scientists must move beyond common sense and rely on conclusions based on systematic study.

III. The Origins of Sociology

- A. Sociology developed in the middle of the nineteenth century when European social observers began to use scientific methods to test their ideas. The following four factors led to its development:
 - 1. The social upheaval in Europe as a result of the Industrial Revolution, which led to changes in the way people lived their lives;
 - 2. The political revolutions in America and France, which encouraged people to rethink their ideas about social life;
 - 3. The development of imperialism—as the Europeans conquered other nations, they came in contact with different cultures and began to ask why cultures varied;
 - 4. The success of the natural sciences, which created a desire to apply scientific methods in order to find answers for the questions being raised about the social world.
- B. Auguste Comte coined the term “sociology” and suggested the use of positivism—applying the scientific approach to the social world—but he did not utilize this approach himself. Comte believed that this new science should not only discover sociological principles, but should then apply those principles to social reform.
- C. Herbert Spencer viewed societies as evolutionary, coined the term “the survival of the fittest,” and became known for social Darwinism. Spencer was convinced that no one should intervene in the evolution of society and that attempts at social reform were wrong.
- D. Karl Marx, whose ideas about social classes and class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was the foundation of the conflict perspective, believed that class conflict was the key to human history. Marx believed that the conflict and struggle would end only with a revolution by the working class.
- E. Emile Durkheim played an important role in the development of sociology.
 - 1. One of his primary goals was to get sociology recognized as a separate academic discipline.

2. He was interested in understanding the social factors that influence individual behavior; he studied suicide rates among different groups and concluded that social integration—the degree to which people are tied to their social group—was a key social factor in suicide.
 3. Durkheim’s third concern was that social research be practical; sociologists should not only diagnose the causes of social problems but should also develop solutions for them.
- F. Max Weber was one of the most influential of all sociologists, raising issues that remain controversial even today. Disagreeing with Karl Marx, Weber defined religion as a central force in social change (i.e., Protestantism encourages greater economic development and was the central factor in the rise of capitalism in some countries).
1. The Protestant belief system encouraged its members to embrace change.
 2. Protestants sought “signs” that they were in God’s will; financial success became a major sign. The more money they made, the more secure they were about their religious standing.
 3. Weber called this behavior the *Protestant ethic*; he called their readiness to invest capital in order to make more money the *spirit of capitalism*.

IV. Values in Sociological Research

- A. Weber advocated that sociological research should be value free (personal values or biases should not influence social research) and objective (totally neutral).
1. Sociologists agree that objectivity is a proper goal, but acknowledge that no one can escape values entirely.
 2. Replication is when a study is repeated to see if the same results are found. It is one means to avoid the distortions that values can cause.
- B. Although sociologists may agree that research should be objective, the proper purposes and uses of sociology are argued among sociologists, with some taking the position that the proper role of sociology is to advance understanding of social life, while others believe that it is the responsibility of sociologists to explore harmful social arrangements of society.
- C. On the one side are those who say that understanding social behavior is sociology’s proper goal and that the knowledge gained through research belongs to the scientific community and can be used by anyone for any purpose. On the other side are those who say the goal of sociological research should be to investigate harmful social conditions and that sociologists should lead the way in reforming society.

V. *Verstehen* and Social Facts

- A. Weber argued that sociologists should use *Verstehen* (“to grasp by insight”) in order to see beyond the social facts to the subjective meanings that people attach to their own behavior.
- B. Durkheim believed that social facts, patterns of behavior that characterize a social group, reflect underlying conditions of society and should be used to interpret other social facts.
- C. Social facts and *Verstehen* fit together because they reinforce each other; sociologists use *Verstehen* in order to interpret social facts.

VI. Sexism in Early Sociology

- A. In the early years of sociology, the field was dominated by men because rigidly defined social roles prevented most women from pursuing an education.
1. Women were supposed to devote themselves to the four K’s: *Kirche, Küchen, Kinder, und Kleider* (church, cooking, children, and clothes).
 2. At the same time, a few women from wealthy families managed to get an education; a few even studied sociology, although the sexism in the universities stopped them from earning advanced degrees, becoming professors, or having their research recognized.
- B. Harriet Martineau studied social life in both Great Britain and the United States, publishing *Society in America* decades before Durkheim and Weber were even born. While her original research has been largely ignored by the discipline, she is known for her translations of Comte’s ideas into English.

VII. Sociology in North America

- A. The first departments of sociology in the United States were at the University of Kansas (1892), Atlanta University (1897), and the University of Chicago (1899); the first in Canada was at McGill University (1922).
 - 1. Albion Small, founder of the department of sociology at the University of Chicago, also established the *American Journal of Sociology*.
 - 2. The department of sociology at the University of Chicago dominated North American sociology; other early sociologists from the University of Chicago were Robert E. Park, Ernest Burgess, and George Herbert Mead.
- B. The situation of women in North America was similar to that of European women, and their contributions to sociology met a similar fate. Denied a role in the universities, many turned to social activism, working with the poor and regarded as social workers.
- C. Jane Addams is an example of a sociologist who was able to combine the role of sociologist with that of social reformer.
 - 1. In 1889, she founded Hull House, a settlement house for the poor, and worked to bridge the gap between the powerful and powerless.
 - 2. Sociologists from nearby University of Chicago visited Hull House frequently.
 - 3. She is the only sociologist to have won the Nobel Peace Prize; she was awarded this in 1931.
- D. African American professionals also faced problems.
 - 1. W. E. B. Du Bois was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard. He conducted extensive research on race relations in the United States, publishing one book a year on this subject between 1896 and 1914.
 - 2. Despite his accomplishments, he encountered prejudice and discrimination in his professional and personal life. When he attended professional sociologists' meetings, he was not permitted to eat or stay in the same hotels as the white sociologists.
 - 3. Frustrated at the lack of improvements in race relations, he turned to social action, helping to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) along with Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, and others from Hull House.
 - 4. Until recently, his contributions to sociology were overlooked.
- E. Many early North American sociologists combined the role of sociologist with that of social reformer. For example, University of Chicago sociologists Park and Burgess, studied many urban problems and offered suggestions on how to alleviate them. By the 1940s, as sociologists became more concerned with establishing sociology as an academic discipline, the emphasis shifted from social reform to social theory.
 - 1. Talcott Parsons developed abstract models of society to show how the parts of society harmoniously work together.
 - 2. Countering this development was C. Wright Mills, who urged sociologists to get back to social reform. He saw the emergency of the *power elite* as an imminent threat to freedom.
- F. The debate over what should be the proper goals of sociological analysis—analyzing society vs. reforming society—continues today.
 - 1. Applied sociology exists between these two extremes. One of the first attempts at applied sociology was the founding of the NAACP.
 - 2. Today, applied sociologists work in a variety of settings, from business and hi-tech organizations to government and not-for-profit agencies.
 - 3. Applied sociology is the application of sociological knowledge in some specific setting, rather than an attempt to rebuild society. Both sociologists who focus on social reform and those who emphasize basic sociology reject applied sociology.

VIII. Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology

- A. Theory is a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work; it is an explanation of how two or more facts are related to one another. Sociologists use three different theoretical perspectives to understand social behavior.
- B. Symbolic interactionism views symbols, things to which we attach meaning, as the basis of social life.
 - 1. Through the use of symbols, people are able to define relationships to others; to coordinate actions with others, thereby making social life possible; and to develop a sense of themselves.
 - 2. A symbolic interactionist studying divorce would focus on how the changing meanings of marriage, family, and divorce have all contributed to the increase in the rate of divorce in U.S. society.
- C. The central idea of functional analysis is that society is a whole unit, made up of interrelated parts that work together.
 - 1. To understand society, we must look at both structure (how the parts of society fit together to make up the whole) and function (how each part contributes to society).
 - 2. Robert Merton used the term function to refer to the beneficial consequences of people's actions to keep society stable and dysfunction to refer to consequences that undermine stability. Functions can be either manifest (actions that are intended) or latent (unintended consequences).
 - 3. In trying to explain divorce, a functionalist would look at how industrialization and urbanization both contributed to the changing function of marriage and the family.
- D. According to conflict theory, society is viewed as composed of groups competing for scarce resources.
- E. Karl Marx focused on struggles between the bourgeoisie, the small group of capitalists who own the means of production, and the proletariat, the masses of workers exploited by the capitalists.
 - 1. Contemporary conflict theorists have expanded this perspective to include conflict in all relations of power and authority.
 - 2. Just as Marx stressed conflict between capitalists and workers, many feminists stress a similar conflict between men and women.
 - 3. Divorce is seen as the outcome of the shifting balance of power within a family; as women have gained power and try to address inequalities in their relationships, men resist.
 - 4. The perspectives differ in their level of analysis. Functionalists and conflict theorists provide macro-level analysis because they examine the large-scale patterns of society. Symbolic interactionists carry out micro-level analysis because they focus on the small-scale patterns of social life.
- F. Each perspective provides a different and often sharply contrasting picture of the world. However, sociologists often use all three perspectives because no one theory or level of analysis encompasses all of reality.

IX. Trends Shaping the Future of Sociology

- A. To understand the tension between social reform and social analysis, sociologists have found it useful to divide sociology into three phases.
 - 1. In the first phase the primary concern of sociologists was making the world a better place.
 - 2. During the second phase, from the 1920s until World War II, sociologists sought to establish sociology as a respected field of knowledge, emphasizing basic, or pure, sociology.
 - 3. In the third (current) phase, there has been an attempt to merge sociological knowledge and practical work with the development of applied sociology. This trend has gained momentum in recent years.
 - 4. The American Sociological Association (ASA) is promoting public sociology. The ASA wants the public, especially politicians and policy makers, to make use of sociological data in order to better understand how society works.

5. Despite being able to identify three phases, each of which has been characterized by a different position on reform vs. analysis, there has never been complete consensus on which approach is better.
- B. Globalization is a second major trend destined to leave its mark on sociology.
1. Globalization is the breaking down of national boundaries because of advances in communications, trade, and travel.
 2. Globalization is likely to broaden the scope of sociological analysis as sociologists look beyond the boundaries of the United States in considering global issues.
- C. Globalization is one of the most significant events in world history. This book stresses the impact of globalization on our lives today.

Key Terms

After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

applied sociology: the use of sociology to solve problems—from the micro level of family relationships to the macro level of crime and pollution (21)

bourgeoisie: Karl Marx's term for capitalists, those who own the means to produce wealth (11)

class conflict: Marx's term for the struggle between the proletariat (workers) and the bourgeoisie (capitalist) (11)

common sense: those things that “everyone knows” are true (8)

conflict theory: a theoretical framework in which society is viewed as composed of groups competing for scarce resources (29)

functional analysis: a theoretical framework in which society is viewed as composed of various parts, each with a function that, when fulfilled, contributes to society's equilibrium; also known as functionalism and structural functionalism (26)

generalization: a statement that goes beyond the individual case and is applied to a broader group or situation (7)

globalization: the extensive interconnections among nations due to the expansion of capitalism (33)

globalization of capitalism: capitalism (investing to make profits within a rational system) becoming the globe's dominant economic system (33)

macro-level analysis: an examination of large-scale patterns of society (30)

micro-level analysis: an examination of small-scale patterns of society (30)

natural sciences: the intellectual and academic disciplines designed to comprehend, explain, and predict events in our natural environment (5)

nonverbal interaction: communication without words through gestures, space, silence, and so on (30)

objectivity: total neutrality (14)

patterns: recurring characteristics or events (7)

positivism: the application of the scientific approach to the social world (10)

proletariat: Marx's term for the exploited class, the mass of workers who do not own the means of production (11)

pure or basic sociology: sociological research whose only purpose is to make discoveries about life in human groups, not to make changes in those groups (21)

replication: repeating a study in order to check its findings (14)

science: the application of systematic methods to obtain knowledge and the knowledge obtained by those methods (5)

scientific method: the use of objective, systematic observations to test theories (10)

social facts: Durkheim's term for a group's patterns of behavior (15)

social integration: the degree to which people feel a part of social groups (12)

social interaction: what people do when they are in one another's presence (30)

social location: the group memberships that people have because of their location in history and society (4)

social sciences: the intellectual and academic disciplines designed to understand the social world objectively by means of controlled and repeated observations (6)

society: a term used by sociologists to refer to a group of people who share a culture and a territory (4)
sociological perspective: understanding human behavior by placing it within its broader social context (4)
sociology: the scientific study of society and human behavior (10)
subjective meanings: the meanings that people give to their own behavior (15)
symbolic interactionism: a theoretical perspective in which society is viewed as composed of symbols that people use to establish meaning, develop their views of the world, and communicate with one another (23)
theory: a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work; an explanation of how two or more facts are related to one another (23)
value free: the view that a sociologist's personal values should not influence social research (14)
values: ideas about what is good or worthwhile in life; attitudes about the way the world ought to be (14)
Verstehen: a German word used by Weber that is perhaps best understood as "to have insight into someone's situation" (15)

Key People

Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

Jane Addams: Addams was the founder of Hull House—a settlement house in the immigrant community of Chicago. She invited sociologists from the nearby University of Chicago to visit. In 1931 she was a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. (18)

Ernest Burgess and Harvey Locke: Research by these early sociologists documented a fundamental shift that was occurring in the symbolic meaning of U.S. marriages. They found that marriage was increasingly dependent on mutual affection, understanding, and compatibility. (18)

Auguste Comte: Comte is often credited with being the founder of sociology, because he was the first to suggest that the scientific method be applied to the study of the social world. (10, 26)

Charles Horton Cooley: One of the founders of symbolic interactionism, a major theoretical perspective in sociology. (23)

Lewis Coser: Coser pointed out that conflict is likely to develop among people in close relationships because they are connected by a network of responsibilities, power and rewards. (29)

W. E. B. Du Bois: Du Bois was the first African American to earn a doctorate at Harvard University. For most of his career, he taught sociology at Atlanta University. He was concerned about social injustice, wrote about race relations, and was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). (18-20)

Emile Durkheim: Durkheim was responsible for getting sociology recognized as a separate discipline. He was interested in studying how individual behavior is shaped by social forces and in finding remedies for social ills. He stressed that sociologists should use social facts—patterns of behavior that reflect some underlying condition of society. (12-13, 15, 26)

Harriet Martineau: An Englishwoman who studied British and U.S. social life, Martineau published *Society in America* decades before either Durkheim or Weber were born. She is known primarily for translating Auguste Comte's ideas into English. (17)

Karl Marx: Marx believed that social development grew out of conflict between social classes; under capitalism, this conflict was between the bourgeoisie—those who own the means to produce wealth—and the proletariat—the mass of workers. His work is associated with the conflict perspective. (11, 29)

George Herbert Mead: Mead was one of the founders of symbolic interactionism, a major theoretical perspective in sociology. (18, 23-24)

Robert Merton: Merton contributed the terms *manifest and latent functions* and *dysfunctions* to the functionalist perspective. (26)

C. Wright Mills: Mills suggested that external influences (a person's experiences) become part of his or her thinking and motivations and explain social behavior. As the emphasis in sociology shifted from social reform to social theory, Mills urged sociologists to get back to their roots. He saw the emergence of the power elite composed of top leaders of business, politics and the military as an imminent threat to freedom. (4, 20-21)

- William Ogburn:** As early as 1933, Ogburn noted that personality was becoming more important in mate selection; this supported the symbolic interactionists' argument that there was a fundamental shift in the symbolic meaning of U.S. marriages. (24)
- Talcott Parsons:** Parsons' work dominated sociology in the 1940s and 1950s. He developed abstract models of how the parts of society harmoniously work together. (20-21)
- Albion Small:** Small was the founder of the sociology department at the University of Chicago and the *American Journal of Sociology*. (18)
- Herbert Spencer:** Another early sociologist, Spencer believed that societies evolve from barbarian to civilized forms. He was the first to use the expression "the survival of the fittest" to reflect his belief that social evolution depended on the survival of the most capable and intelligent and the extinction of the less capable. His views became known as *social Darwinism*. (10, 26)
- William I. Thomas:** Along with Mead and Cooley, Thomas was important in establishing symbolic interactionism as a major theoretical perspective in sociology. (23)
- Max Weber:** Weber's most important contribution to sociology was his study of the relationship between the emergence of Protestant belief system and the rise of capitalism. He believed that sociologists should not allow their personal values to affect their social research; objectivity should become the hallmark of sociology. He argued that sociologists should use *Verstehen*—those subjective meanings that people give to their behavior. (13-15)