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DISCOVER
SOCIOLOGY
WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Can societies be studied scientifically? What does the scientific study of societies entail?

2. What is a theory? What is the role of theories in sociology?

3. In your opinion, what social issues or problems are most interesting or important today? What questions about them would you like to study?
A goal of this book is to take you on a sociological journey. But let’s begin with a basic question: **What is sociology?** First of all, sociology is a discipline of and for curious minds! Sociologists are deeply committed to answering the question, “Why?” Why are some people desperately poor and others fabulously wealthy? Why does racial segregation in housing and public education exist, and why does it persist half a century after civil rights laws were enacted? What accounts for the declining marriage rate among the working class and the poor in the United States? How can we explain the fact that low-income people are more likely to be overweight or obese than their middle-class counterparts? Why is the proportion of women entering and completing college rising while the proportion of men has fallen? Why, in spite of this, do men as a group still earn higher incomes than women as a group do? And how is it that social media are being simultaneously praised as instruments of transformational activism and criticized as causes of social alienation and civic disengagement? Take a moment now to think about some why questions you have about society and social life: As you look around you, hear the news, and interact with other people, what strikes you as fascinating—but perhaps difficult to understand? What are you curious about?

Sociology is an academic discipline that takes a scientific approach to answering the kinds of questions our curious minds imagine. When we say that sociology is **scientific**, we mean that it is a way of **learning about the world that combines logically constructed theory and systematic observation**. The goal of sociological study and research is to base answers to questions like those above on a careful examination of the roots of social phenomena such as poverty, segregation, and the wage gap. Sociologists do this with **research methods**—surveys, interviews, observations, and archival research, among others—which yield data that can be tested, challenged, and revised. In this text, you will see how sociology is done—and you will learn how to do sociology yourself.
Concisely stated, sociology is the scientific study of human social relationships, groups, and societies. Unlike natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, and biology, sociology is one of several social sciences engaged in the scientific study of human beings and the social worlds they consciously create and inhabit. The purpose of sociology is to understand and generate new knowledge about human behavior, social relations, and social institutions on a larger scale. The sociologist adheres to the principle of social embeddedness: the idea that economic, political, and other forms of human behavior are fundamentally shaped by social relations. Thus, sociologists pursue studies on a wide range of issues occurring within, between, and among families, communities, states, nations, and the world. Other social sciences, some of which you may be studying, include anthropology, economics, political science, and psychology.

Sociology is a field in which students have the opportunity to build a broad spectrum of important skills, ranging from gathering and analyzing information to identifying and solving problems to effective written and oral communication. Throughout this book, we draw your attention to important skills you can gain through the study of sociology and the kinds of skills employers in different occupational fields are seeking in potential employees. Sociology opens the door to both greater understanding of the social world and a range of career and graduate study possibilities.

Doing sociology requires that you build a foundation on which the knowledge you gain will rest. Some of the key foundations of sociology are the sociological imagination and critical thinking. We turn to these below.

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**Scientific**: A way of learning about the world that combines logically constructed theory and systematic observation.

**Sociology**: The scientific study of human social relations, groups, and societies.

**Social embeddedness**: The idea that economic, political, and other forms of human behavior are fundamentally shaped by social relations.

**Sociological imagination**: The ability to grasp the relationship between individual lives and the larger social forces that shape them.
WHY ARE DIVORCE RATES SO HIGH?

In the United States, the probability of a first marriage ending in separation or divorce within 5 years is 22%; after 10 years, it rises to 36%. Over the longer term, the rate of marital dissolution is closer to 50% (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010). Just half a century ago, most marriages were “‘til death do us part.” What accounts for the change?

The sociological imagination shows us that marriage and divorce, seemingly the most private of matters, are as much public issues as personal ones. Consider the fact that when wages for working people lagged from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, growing numbers of women went to work to help their families make ends meet. Many middle-class women also went to college and pursued careers as a means of personal fulfillment. In fact, today more women than men finish undergraduate degrees. As a result of trends like these, women today enjoy a higher measure of economic independence than ever before. The combination of educational attainment and satisfying careers reinforces women’s independence, making it easier for those who are in unhappy marriages to leave them. Greater social acceptance of divorce has also removed much of the stigma once associated with failed marriages.

Social trends like those described have made it more likely that an unhappy couple will divorce rather than stay in a failing marriage. Thus, this private trouble is in many respects strongly influenced by public issues such as women’s rising economic independence and the dynamism of cultural norms related to marriage and divorce.

THINK IT THROUGH

What other “private troubles” could sociologists identify as “public issues”?

or the beginning or end of a military conflict—shape the obstacles and opportunities that contribute to the unfolding of our own life’s story. Among Mills’s (1959/2000b) most often cited examples is the following:

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals. (p. 9)

To apply the idea to contemporary economic conditions, we might look at recent college graduates. If many of the young people who graduated from college in the middle years of the
The Sociological Imagination

2000s found the jobs they wanted, they may have accounted for their success by citing personal effort or solid academic qualifications. These are, of course, very important, but the sociological imagination suggests that there are also larger social forces at work—a booming economy in this period contributed to a low rate of unemployment among the college educated. Consider, for instance, that while unemployment among young male college graduates was just under 7% in 2007 (just before an economic crisis hit in the United States), by 2010 it had peaked at more than 12%. For young female college graduates, it grew from less than 5% in 2007 to a peak of more than 9% in 2011. In 2013, it took a downward turn for both groups before rising slightly in 2014 (Figure 1.1). If your friends or relatives who graduated into the labor market during the economic crisis or even the first years following that period encountered difficulties securing solid first jobs, this suggests that personal effort and qualifications are only part of the explanation for the success of one graduating class and the frustration of another.

Understanding this relationship is particularly critical for people in the United States, who often regard individuals as fully responsible for their own successes and failures. For instance, it is easy to fault the poor for their poverty, assuming they only need to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” We may neglect the powerful role of social forces like racial or ethnic discrimination, the outsourcing or automation of manufacturing jobs that used to employ those with less education, or the poor state of education in many economically distressed rural and urban areas. The sociological imagination implores us to seek the intersection between private troubles, such as a family’s poverty, and public issues, such as lack of access to good schooling or jobs, to develop a more informed and comprehensive understanding of the social world and social issues.

It is useful, when we talk about the sociological imagination, to bring in the concepts of agency and structure. Sociologists often talk about social actions—individual and group behavior—in these terms. **Agency** can be understood as the ability of individuals and groups to exercise free will and to make social changes on a small or large scale. **Structure** is a complex term but may be defined as patterned social arrangements that have effects on agency—structure may enable or constrain social action. For example, sociologists talk about the class structure, which is composed of social groups who hold varying amounts of resources such as money, political voice, and social status. They also identify normative structures—for instance, they might analyze patterns of social norms regarding “appropriate” gender behaviors in different cultural contexts.

Sociologists take a strong interest in the relationship between structure and agency. Consider that, on one hand, we all have the ability to make choices—so we have free will and we can opt for one path over another. On the other hand, the structures that surround us impose obstacles on us or afford us opportunities: We can make choices, but they may be enabled or constrained by structure. For instance, in the early 1900s, we would surely have found bright young women in the U.S. middle class who wanted to study to be doctors or lawyers. The social norms of the time, however, suggested that young women

![Figure 1.1 Unemployment Rates Among Young College Graduates in the United States, 1989–2014](image)

**Agency**:

The ability of individuals and groups to exercise free will and to make social changes on a small or large scale.

**Structure**:

Patterned social arrangements that have effects on agency.

C. Wright Mills highlighted the use of the sociological imagination in studying social issues. When 16% of urban residents are poor by the government’s official measure, we cannot assume the sole cause is personal failings but must ask how large-scale social and economic forces are implicated in widespread socioeconomic disadvantage experienced in many communities.
of this status were better off marrying and starting families. There were also legal constraints to women’s entry into higher education and the paid labor force. So while the women in our example might have individually argued and pushed to go to college and have professional careers, the dreams of this group were constrained by powerful normative and legal structures that identified women’s place as being in the home.

Consider the relationship between the class structure and individual agency as another way of thinking about social mobility in U.S. society. If, for instance, a young man today whose parents are well educated and whose family is economically prosperous wishes to go to college and become a doctor, his position in the class structure (or the position of his family) is enabling—that is, it makes it likely that he will be able to make this choice and to realize it. If, however, a young man from a poor family with no college background dreams of being an engineer and wants to study in college, his position in the class structure is likely to be constraining: Not only does his family have insufficient economic means to pay for college, but he may also be studying in an underfunded or underperforming high school that cannot provide the advanced courses he needs to prepare for college. His lack of college role models may also be a factor. This does not mean that inevitably the first young man will go to college and the second will not; it does, however, suggest that probabilities favor the first college aspirant over the second.

Put succinctly, in order to understand why some students go to college and others do not, sociologists would say that we cannot rely on individual choice or will (agency) alone—structures, whether subtly or quite obviously, exercise an influence on social behavior and outcomes. At the same time, we should not see structures as telling the whole story of social behavior, because history shows the power of human agency in making change even in the face of obstacles. Agency itself can transform structures (for example, think about the ways women’s historical activism has helped to transform limiting gender norms for women today). Sociologists weight both agency and structure and continue to seek to understand how the two interact and connect in affecting social behavior. For the most part, sociologists understand the relationship as reciprocal—that is, it goes in both directions, as structure affects agency and agency, in turn, can change the dimensions of a structure (Figure 1.2).

CRITICAL THINKING

Applying the sociological perspective requires more than an ability to use the sociological imagination. It also demands critical thinking, the ability to evaluate claims about truth by using reason and evidence. In everyday life, we frequently accept things as “true” because they are familiar, feel right, or are consistent with our beliefs. Critical thinking takes a different approach—recognizing poor arguments, rejecting statements not supported by evidence, and questioning our assumptions. One of the founders of modern sociology, Max Weber, captured the spirit of critical thinking in two words when he said that a key task of sociological inquiry is to openly acknowledge “inconvenient facts.”

Critical thinking requires us to be open-minded, but it does not mean that we must accept all arguments as equally valid. Those supported by logic and backed by evidence are clearly preferable to those that are not. For instance, we may passionately agree with Thomas Jefferson’s famous statement “that government is best that governs least.” However, as sociologists we must also ask, “What evidence backs up the claim that less government is better under all circumstances?”

To think critically, it is useful to follow six simple rules (adapted from Wade & Tavris, 1997):

1. Be willing to ask any question, no matter how difficult. The belief in small government is a cherished U.S. ideal. But sociologists who study the role of government in modern society must be willing to ask whether there are circumstances under which more—not less—government is better. Government’s role in areas such as homeland security, education, and health care has grown in the past several years—what are the positive and negative aspects of this growth?

2. Think logically and be clear. Logic and clarity require us to define concepts in a way that allows us to study them. “Big government” is a vague concept that must be made more precise and measurable before it provides for useful research. Are we speaking of federal, state, or local government, or all of these? Is “big” measured by the cost of government services, the number of agencies or offices within the government, the number of people working for it, or something else? What did Jefferson mean by “best,” and what would that “best” government look like? Who would have the power to define this notion in any case?

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**FIGURE 1.2 Structure and Agency**

![Structure and Agency Diagram](image)

Critical thinking: The ability to evaluate claims about truth by using reason and evidence.
3. **Back up your arguments with evidence.** Founding Father Thomas Jefferson is a formidable person to quote, but quoting him does not prove that smaller government is better in the 21st century. To find evidence, we need to seek out studies of contemporary societies to see whether there is a relationship between a population’s well-being and the size of government or the breadth of services it provides. Because studies may offer contradictory evidence, we also need to be able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of arguments on different sides of the issue.

4. **Think about the assumptions and biases—including your own—that underlie all studies.** You may insist that government has a key role to play in modern society. On the other hand, you may believe with equal passion that big government is one root of the problems in the United States. Critical thinking, however, requires that we recognize our beliefs and biases. Otherwise we might unconsciously seek out only evidence that supports our argument, ignoring evidence to the contrary. Passion has a role to play in research: It can motivate us to devote long hours to studying an issue. But passion should not play a role when we are weighing evidence and drawing conclusions.

5. **Avoid anecdotal evidence.** It is tempting to draw a general conclusion from a single experience or anecdote, but that experience may illustrate the exception rather than the rule. For example, you may know someone who just yesterday received a letter mailed 2 years ago, but that is not evidence that the U.S. Postal Service is inefficient or does not fulfill its mandates. To determine whether this government agency is working well, you would have to study its entire mail delivery system and its record of work over time.

6. **Be willing to admit when you are wrong or uncertain about your results.** Sometimes we expect to find support for an argument only to find that things are not so clear. For example, consider the position of a sociologist who advocates small government and learns that Japan and Singapore initially became economic powerhouses because their governments played leading roles in promoting growth of a sociologist who champions an expanded role for government but learns from the downturn of the 1990s in the Asian economies that some things can be better achieved by private enterprise. The answers we get are sometimes contradictory, and we learn from recognizing the error of our assumptions and beliefs as well.

Critical thinking also means becoming “critical consumers” of the information—news, blogs, surveys, texts, magazines, and scientific studies—that surrounds us. To be a good sociologist, it is important to look beyond the commonsense understanding of social life and develop a critical perspective. Being critical consumers of information entails paying attention to the sources of information we encounter and asking questions about how data were gathered.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGICAL THINKING**

Humans have been asking questions about the nature of social life as long as people have lived in societies. Aristotle and Plato wrote extensively about social relationships more than 2,000 years ago. Ibn Khaldun, an Arab scholar writing in the 14th century, advanced a number of sociological concepts we recognize today, including ideas about social conflict and cohesion. Yet modern sociological concepts and research methods did not emerge until the 19th century, after the Industrial Revolution, and then largely in those European nations undergoing dramatic societal changes like industrialization and urbanization.

**THE BIRTH OF SOCIOLOGY: SCIENCE, PROGRESS, INDUSTRIALIZATION, AND URBANIZATION**

We can trace sociology’s roots to four interrelated historical developments that gave birth to the modern world: the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, industrialization, and urbanization. Since these developments initially occurred in Europe, it is not surprising that sociological perspectives and ideas evolved there during the 19th century. By the end of the 19th century, sociology had taken root in North America as well; somewhat later, it gained a foothold in Central and South America, Africa, and Asia. Sociology throughout the world initially bore the stamp of its European and North American origins, though recent decades have brought a greater diversity of perspectives to the discipline.
THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION  The rise of modern natural and physical sciences, beginning in Europe in the 16th century, offered scholars a more advanced understanding of the physical world. The success of natural science contributed to the belief that science could also be fruitfully applied to human affairs, thereby enabling people to improve society or even perfect it. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the term sociology to characterize what he believed would be a new “social physics”—that is, the scientific study of society.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT  Inspired in part by the success of the physical sciences, French philosophers in the 18th century such as Voltaire (1694–1778), Montesquieu (1689–1755), Diderot (1719–1784), and Rousseau (1712–1778) promised that humankind could attain lofty heights by applying scientific understanding to human affairs. Enlightenment ideals such as equality, liberty, and fundamental human rights found a home in the emerging social sciences, particularly sociology. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), considered by many to be the first modern sociologist, argued that sociological understanding would create a more egalitarian, peaceful society, in which individuals would be free to realize their full potential. Many of sociology’s founders shared the hope that a fairer and more just society would be achieved through the scientific understanding of society.

THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION  The Industrial Revolution, which began in England in the mid- to late 18th century and soon spread to other countries, dramatically changed European societies. Traditional agricultural economies and the small-scale production of handicrafts in the home gave way to more efficient, profit-driven manufacturing based in factories. For instance, in 1801 in the English city of Leeds, there were about 20 factories manufacturing a variety of goods. By 1838, Leeds was home to 106 woolen mills alone, employing 10,000 people.

Small towns, including Leeds, were transformed into bustling cities, showcasing extremes of wealth and poverty as well as opportunity and struggle. In the face of rapid social change and growing inequality, sociologists sought to gain a social scientific perspective on what was happening and how it had come about. For example, German theorist and revolutionary Karl Marx (1818–1883), who had an important impact on later sociological theorizing about modern societies and economies, predicted that industrialization would make life increasingly intolerable for the masses. He believed that private property ownership by the wealthy allowed for the exploitation of working people and that its elimination, and revolution, would bring about a utopia of equality and genuine freedom for all.

URBANIZATION: THE POPULATION SHIFT TOWARD CITIES  Industrialization fostered the growth of cities, as people streamed from rural fields to urban factories in search of work. By the end of the 19th century, more than 20 million people lived in English cities. The population of London alone exceeded 7 million by 1910.

Early industrial cities were often fetid places, characterized by pollution and dirt, crime, and crowded housing tenements. In Europe, early sociologists lamented the passing of communal village life and its replacement by a savage and alienating urban existence. Durkheim, for example, worried about the potential breakdown of stabilizing beliefs and values in modern urban society. He argued that whereas traditional communities were held together by shared culture and norms, or accepted social behaviors and beliefs, modern industrial communities were threatened by anomie, or a state of normlessness that occurs when people lose sight of the shared rules and values that give order and meaning to their lives. In a state of anomie, individuals often feel confused and anxious because they do not know how to interact with each other and their environment. Durkheim raised the question of what would hold societies and communities together as they shifted from homogeneity and shared cultures and values to heterogeneous masses of diverse occupations, cultures, and norms.

19TH-CENTURY FOUNDERS  Despite its largely European origins, early sociology sought to develop universal understandings that would apply to other peoples, times, and places. The discipline’s principal acknowledged founders—Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber—left their marks on sociology in different ways.

Norms: Accepted social behaviors and beliefs.

Anomie: A social condition of normlessness; a state of normative uncertainty that occurs when people lose touch with the shared rules and values that give order and meaning to their lives.
AUGUSTE COMTE Auguste Comte (1798–1857), a French social theorist, is credited with founding modern sociology, naming it, and establishing it as the scientific study of social relationships. The twin pillars of Comte's sociology were the study of social statics, the way society is held together, and the analysis of social dynamics, the laws that govern social change. Comte believed social science could be used effectively to manage the social change resulting from modern industrial society, but always with a strong respect for traditions and history.

Comte proclaimed that his new science of society was positivist. This meant that it was to be based on facts alone, which should be determined scientifically and allowed to speak for themselves. Comte argued that this purely factual approach was the proper method for sociology. He argued that all sciences—and all societies—go through three stages. The first stage is a theological one, in which key ways of understanding the world are framed in terms of superstition, imagination, and religion. The second stage is a metaphysical one, characterized by abstract speculation but framed by the basic belief that society is the product of natural rather than supernatural forces. The third and last stage is one in which knowledge is based on scientific reasoning "from the facts." Comte saw himself as leading sociology toward its final positivist stage.

Comte left a lasting mark on modern sociology. The scientific study of social life continues to be the goal of sociological research. His belief that social institutions have a strong impact on individual behavior—that is, that our actions are the products of personal choices and the surrounding social context—remains at the heart of sociology.

HARRIET MARTINEAU Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) was an English sociologist who, despite deafness and other physical challenges, became a prominent social and historical writer. Her greatest handicap was being a woman in male-dominated intellectual circles that failed to value female voices. Today she is frequently recognized as the first major woman sociologist.

Deeply influenced by Comte's work, Martineau translated his six-volume treatise on politics into English. Her editing helped make Comte's esoteric prose accessible to the English-speaking world. As a founding figure in the social sciences, Auguste Comte is associated with positivism, or the belief that the study of society must be anchored in facts and the scientific method.

Social statics: The way society is held together.

Social dynamics: The laws that govern social change.

Positivist: Science that is based on facts alone.
world, ensuring his standing as a leading figure in sociology. Martineau was also a distinguished scholar in her own right. She wrote dozens of books, more than a thousand newspaper columns, and 25 novels, including a three-volume study, Society in America (1837), based on observations of the United States that she made during a tour of the country.

Martineau, like Comte, sought to identify basic laws that govern society. She derived three of her four “laws” from other theorists. The fourth law, however, was her own and reflected her progressive (today we might say feminist) principles: For a society to evolve, it must ensure social justice for women and other oppressed groups. In her study of U.S. society, Martineau treated slavery and women’s experience of dependence in marriage as indicators of the limits of the moral development of the United States. In her view, the United States was unable to achieve its full social potential while it was morally stunted by persistent injustices like slavery and women’s inequality. The question of whether the provision of social justice is critical to societal development remains a relevant and compelling one today.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM Auguste Comte founded and named the discipline of sociology, but French scholar Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) set the field on its present course. Durkheim established the early subject matter of sociology, laid out rules for conducting research, and developed an important theory of social change.

For Durkheim, sociology’s subject matter was social facts, qualities of groups that are external to individual members yet constrain their thinking and behavior. Durkheim argued that such social facts as religious beliefs and social duties are external—that is, they are part of the social context and are larger than our individual lives. They also have the power to shape our behavior. You may feel compelled to act in certain ways in different contexts—in the classroom, on a date, at a religious ceremony—even if you are not always aware of such social pressures.

Durkheim also argued that only social facts can explain other social facts. For example, there is no scientific evidence that men have an innate knack for business compared with women—but in 2012, women headed just 18 of the Fortune 500 companies. A Durkheimian approach would highlight women’s experience in society—where historically they have been socialized into more domestic values or restricted to certain noncommercial professions—and the fact that the social networks that foster mobility in the corporate world today are still primarily male to help explain why men dominate the upper ranks of the business world.

Durkheim’s principal concern was explaining the impact of modern society on social solidarity, the bonds that unite the members of a social group. In his view, in traditional society these bonds are based on similarity—people speak the same language, share the same customs and beliefs, and do similar work tasks. He called this mechanical solidarity. In modern industrial society, however, bonds based on similarity break down.

Everyone has a different job to perform in the industrial division of labor, and modern societies are more likely to be socially diverse. However, workers in different occupational positions are dependent on one another for things like safety, education, and the provision of food and other goods essential to survival. The people filling these positions may not be alike in culture, beliefs, or language, but their dependence on one another contributes to social cohesion. Borrowing from biology, Durkheim called this organic solidarity, suggesting that modern society functions as an interdependent organic whole, like a human body.

Yet organic solidarity, Durkheim argued, is not as strong as mechanical solidarity. People no longer necessarily share the same norms and values. The consequence, according

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**Social facts:** Qualities of groups that are external to individual members yet constrain their thinking and behavior.

**Social solidarity:** The bonds that unite the members of a social group.
The Development of Sociological Thinking

to Durkheim, is anomie. In this weakened condition, the social order disintegrates and pathological behavior increases (Durkheim, 1922/1973a).

Consider whether the United States, a modern and diverse society, is held together primarily by organic solidarity, or whether the hallmark of mechanical solidarity, a collective conscience—the common beliefs and values that bind a society together—is in evidence. Do public demonstrations of patriotism on nationally significant anniversaries such as September 11 and July 4 indicate mechanical solidarity built on a collective sense of shared values, norms, and practices? Or do the deeply divisive politics of recent years suggest social bonds based more fully on practical interdependence?

KARL MARX The extensive writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883) influenced the development of economics and political science as well as sociology. They also shaped world politics and inspired communist revolutions in Russia (later the Soviet Union), China, and Cuba, among others.

Marx’s central idea was deceptively simple: Virtually all societies throughout history have been divided into economic classes, with one class prospering at the expense of others. All human history, Marx believed, should be understood as the product of class conflict, competition between social classes over the distribution of wealth, power, and other valued resources in society (Marx & Engels, 1848/1998).

In the period of early industrialization in which he lived, Marx condemned capitalism’s exploitation of working people, the proletariat, by the ownership class, the bourgeoisie. As we will see in later chapters, Marx’s views on conflict and inequality are still influential in contemporary sociological thinking, even among sociologists who do not share his views on society.

Marx focused his attention on the emerging capitalist industrial society (Marx, 1867/1992a, 1885/1992b, 1894/1992c). Unlike his contemporaries in sociology, however, Marx saw capitalism as a transitional stage to a final period in human history in which economic classes and the unequal distribution of rewards and opportunities linked to class inequality would disappear and be replaced by a utopia of equality.

Although many of Marx’s predictions have not proven to be correct, his critical analysis of the dynamics of capitalism proved insightful. Among other things, Marx argued that capitalism would lead to accelerating technological change, the replacement of workers by machines, and the growth of monopoly capitalism.

Marx also presciently predicted that ownership of the means of production, the sites and technology that produce the goods (and sometimes services) we need and use, would come to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. As a result, he believed, a growing wave of people would be thrust down into the proletariat, which owns only its own labor power. In modern society, large corporations have progressively swallowed up or pushed out smaller businesses; where small lumberyards and pharmacies used to serve many communities, corporate giants such as Home Depot, CVS, and Best Buy have moved in, putting locally owned establishments out of business.

In many U.S. towns, small business owners have joined forces to protest the construction of “big box” stores like Walmart (now the largest private employer in the United States), arguing that these enormous establishments, while they offer cheap goods, wreak havoc on local retailers and bring only the meager economic benefit of masses of entry-level, low-wage jobs. From a Marxist perspective, we might say that the local retailers, in resisting the incursion of the capitalist behemoth Walmart, are fighting their own “proletarianization.” Even physicians, many

Collective conscience: The common beliefs and values that bind a society together.

Class conflict: Competition between social classes over the distribution of wealth, power, and other valued resources in society.

Proletariat: The working class; wage workers.

Bourgeoisie: The capitalist (or property-owning) class.

Means of production: The sites and technology that produce the goods we need and use.
of whom used to own their own means of production in the form of private medical practices, have increasingly been driven by economic necessity into working for large health maintenance organizations (HMOs), where they are salaried employees.

Unlike Comte and Durkheim, Marx thought social change would be revolutionary, not evolutionary, and would be the product of oppressed workers rising up against a capitalist system that exploits the many to benefit the few.

**MAX WEBER** Max Weber (1864–1920), a German sociologist who wrote at the beginning of the 20th century, left a substantial academic legacy. Among his contributions are an analysis of how Protestantism fostered the rise of capitalism in Europe (Weber, 1904–1905/2002) and insights into the emergence of modern bureaucracy (Weber, 1919/1946). Weber, like other founders of sociology, took up various political causes, condemning injustice wherever he found it. Although pessimistic about capitalism, he did not believe, as did Marx, that some alternative utopian form of society would arise. Nor did he see sociologists enjoying privileged insights into the social world that would qualify them to wisely counsel rulers and industrialists, as Comte (and, to some extent, Durkheim) had envisioned.

Weber believed that an adequate explanation of the social world begins with the individual and takes into account the meaning of what people say and do. While he argued that research should be scientific and value-free, Weber also believed that to explain what people do, we must use a method he termed *Verstehen*, the German word for interpretive understanding. This methodology, rarely used by sociologists today, sought to explain social relationships by having the sociologist/observer imagine how the subjects being studied might have perceived and interpreted the situation. Studying social life, Weber felt, is not like studying plants or chemical reactions, because human beings act on the basis of meanings and motives.

Weber’s theories of social and economic organization have also been highly influential (Weber, 1921/2012). Weber argued that the modern Western world showed an ever-increasing reliance on logic, efficiency, rules, and reason. According to him, modern societies are characterized by the development and growing influence of *formal rationality*, a context in which people’s pursuit of goals is increasingly shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures. One of Weber’s most widely known illustrations of formal rationality comes from his study of *bureaucracies*, formal organizations characterized by written rules, hierarchical authority, and paid staff, intended to promote organizational efficiency. Bureaucracies, for Weber, epitomized formally rational systems: On one hand, they offer clear, knowable rules and regulations for the efficient pursuit of particular ends, like obtaining a passport or getting financial aid for higher education. On the other hand, he feared, the bureaucratization of modern society would also progressively strip people of their humanity and creativity and result in an *iron cage* of rationalized structures with irrational consequences.

Weber’s ideas about bureaucracy were remarkably prescient in their characterization of our bureaucratic (and formally rationalized) modern world. Today we are also confronted regularly with both the incredible efficiency and the baffling irrationality of modern bureaucratic structures. Within moments of entering into an efficiently concluded contract with a wireless phone service provider, we can become consumers of a cornucopia of technological opportunities, with the ability to chat on the phone or receive text messages from virtually anywhere, post photographs or videos online, and pass the time playing downloaded games. Should we later be confused by a bill and

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**Verstehen**: The German word for interpretive understanding; Weber’s proposed methodology for explaining social relationships by having the sociologist imagine how subjects might perceive a situation.  
**Formal rationality**: A context in which people’s pursuit of goals is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures.  
**Bureaucracies**: Formal organizations characterized by written rules, hierarchical authority, and paid staff, intended to promote organizational efficiency.
need to speak to a company representative, however, we may be shuttled through endless repetitions of an automated response system that never seems to offer us the option of speaking with another human being. Today, Weber’s presciently predicted irrationality of rationality is alive and well.

**EARLY 20TH-CENTURY U.S. SOCIOLOGY**

Sociology was born in Europe, but it took firm root in U.S. soil, where it was heavily influenced by turn-of-the-century industrialization and urbanization, as well as by racial strife and discrimination. Strikes by organized labor, corruption in government, an explosion of European immigration, racial segregation, and the growth of city slums all helped mold early sociological thought in the United States. By the late 1800s, a number of universities in the United States were offering sociology courses. The first faculties of sociology were established at the University of Kansas (1889), the University of Chicago (1892), and Atlanta University (1897).

**ROBERT EZRA PARK** The sociology department at the University of Chicago, which gave us what is often known as the “Chicago School” of sociology, dominated the new discipline in the United States at the start of the 20th century. Chicago sociologist Robert Ezra Park (1864–1944) pioneered the study of urban sociology and race relations. Once a muckraking journalist, Park was an equally colorful academic, reportedly coming to class in disheveled clothes and with shaving soap still in his ears. But his students were devoted to him, and his work was widely recognized. His 1921 textbook *An Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, coauthored with his Chicago colleague Ernest Burgess, helped shape the discipline. The Chicago School studied a broad spectrum of social phenomena, from hoboes and flophouses (inexpensive dormitory-style housing) to movie houses, dance halls, and slums, and from youth gangs and mobs to residents of Chicago’s ritzy Gold Coast.

Park was a champion of racial integration, having once served as personal secretary to the African American educator Booker T. Washington. Yet racial discrimination was evident in the treatment of Black sociologists, including W. E. B. Du Bois, a contemporary of many of the sociologists working in the Chicago School.

**W. E. B. DU BOIS** A prominent Black sociologist and civil rights leader at the African American Atlanta University, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) developed ideas that were considered too radical to find broad acceptance in the sociological community. At a time when the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that segregated “separate but equal” facilities for Blacks and Whites were constitutional and when lynching of Black Americans had reached an all-time high, Du Bois condemned the deep-seated racism of White society. Today, his writings on race relations and the lives of U.S. Blacks are classics in the field.

Du Bois sought to show that racism was widespread in U.S. society. He was also critical of Blacks who had “made it” and then turned their backs on those who had not. One of his most enduring ideas is that in U.S. society, African Americans are never able to escape a fundamental awareness of race. They experience a *double consciousness*, as he called it—an awareness of themselves both as Americans and as Blacks, never free of racial stigma. He wrote, “The Negro is sort of a seventh son . . . gifted with second-sight . . . this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois, 1903/2008, p. 12). Today as in Du Bois’s time, physical traits such as skin color may shape people’s perceptions and interactions in significant and complex ways.

**THE MID-20TH CENTURY IN U.S. SOCIOLOGY**

After World War II, sociology began to apply sophisticated quantitative models to the study of social processes. There was also a
At Columbia University, Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) undertook wide-ranging studies that helped further establish sociology as a scientific discipline. Merton is best known for his theory of deviance (Merton, 1938), his work on the sociology of science (Merton, 1996), and his iteration of the distinction between manifest and latent functions (Merton, 1968). He emphasized the development of theories in what he called the “middle range”—midway between the grand theories of Weber, Marx, and Durkheim and quantitative studies of specific social problems.

Another Columbia University sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), renewed interest in Max Weber by translating many of his works into English and applying his ideas to the contemporary United States. But Mills, who also drew on Marx, identified himself as a “plain Marxist.” His concept of the sociological imagination can be traced in part to Marx’s famous statement that “man makes history, but not under circumstances of his own choosing,” meaning that while we are agents of free will, the social context has a profound impact on the obstacles or opportunities in our lives.

Mills synthesized Weberian and Marxist traditions, applying sociological thinking to the most pressing problems of the day, particularly inequality. He advocated an activist sociology with a sense of social responsibility. Like many sociologists, he was willing to turn a critical eye on “common knowledge,” including the belief that the United States is a democracy that represents the interests of all the people. In a provocative study, he examined the workings of the “power elite,” a small group of wealthy businessmen, military leaders, and politicians who Mills believed ran the country largely in their own interests (Mills, 1956/2000a).

WHY SO FEW FOUNDING MOTHERS?

Why did so few women social scientists find a place among sociology’s founders? After all, the American (1776) and French (1789) revolutions elevated such lofty ideals as freedom, liberty, and equality. Yet long after these historical events, women and minorities were still excluded from public life in Europe and North America. Democracy—which gives people the right to participate in their governance—was firmly established as a principle for nearly a century and a half in the United States before women achieved the right to vote in 1920. In France, it took even longer—until 1945.

Sociology as a discipline emerged during the first modern flourishing of feminism in the 19th century. Yet women and people of non-European heritage were systematically excluded from influential positions in the European universities where sociology and other modern social sciences originated. When women did pursue lives as scholars, the men who dominated the social sciences largely ignored their writings. Feminist scholar Julie Daubié won a prize from the Lyon Academy for her essay “Poor Women in the Nineteenth Century,” yet France’s public education minister denied her a diploma on the grounds that he would be “forever holding up his ministry to ridicule” (Kandal, 1988, pp. 57–58).

Between 1840 and 1960, almost no women held senior academic positions in the sociology departments of any European or U.S. universities, with the exception of exclusively women’s colleges.

A number of woman scholars managed to overcome the obstacles to make significant contributions to sociological inquiry. For example, in 1792 the British scholar Mary Wollstonecraft published A Vindication of the Rights of Women, arguing that scientific progress could not occur unless women were allowed to become men’s equals by means of universal education. In France in 1843, Flora Tristan called for equal rights for women workers, “the last remaining slaves in France.” Also in France, Aline Valette published Socialism and Sexualism in 1893, nearly three-quarters of a century before the term sexism found its way into spoken English (Kandal, 1988).

One of sociology’s most prominent early figures, Jane Addams (1860–1935), never won a full-time position at the University of Chicago in spite of the school’s “progressive” leanings. The University of Chicago even denied her an honorary degree—though she wrote 11 books and hundreds of articles and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her dedication to social reform.

Addams is best known as the founder of Hull House, a settlement house for the poor, sick, and aged that became a center for political activists and social reformers. Less well known is the
Sociology: One Way of Looking at the World—Or Many?

Often, multiple sociologists look at the same events, phenomena, or institutions and draw different conclusions. How can this be? One reason is that they may approach their analyses from different theoretical perspectives. In this section, we explore the key theoretical paradigms in sociology and look at how they are used as tools for the analysis of society.

Sociological theories are logical, rigorous frameworks for the interpretation of social life that make particular assumptions and ask particular questions about the social world. The word theory is rooted in the Greek word theoria, which means “a viewing.” An apt metaphor for a theory is a pair of glasses. You can view a social phenomenon such as socioeconomic inequality or poverty, deviance, or consumer culture, or an institution like capitalism or the family, using different theories as lenses.

As you will see in the next section, in the discipline of sociology there are several major categories of theories that seek to examine and explain social phenomena and institutions. Imagine the various sociological theories as different pairs of glasses, each with colored lenses that change the way you see an image: You may look at the same institution or phenomenon as you put on each pair, but it will appear different depending on the glasses you are wearing. Keep in mind that sociological theories are not “truths” about the social world. They are logical, rigorous analytical tools that we can use to inquire about, interpret, and make educated predictions about the world around us. From the vantage point of any sociological theory, some aspects of a phenomenon or an institution are illuminated while others are obscured. In the end, theories are more or less useful depending on how well empirical data—that is, knowledge gathered by researchers through scientific methods—support their analytical conclusions. Below, we outline the basic theoretical perspectives that we will be using in this text.

The three dominant theoretical perspectives in sociology are structural functionalism, social conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. We outline their basic characteristics below and will revisit them again throughout the book. Symbolic interactionism shares with the functionalist and social conflict paradigms an interest in interpreting and understanding social life. However, the first two are macro-level paradigms, concerned with large-scale patterns and institutions. Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level paradigm—that is, it is concerned with small-group social relations and interactions.

Structural functionalism, social conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism form the basic foundation of contemporary sociological theorizing (Table 1.1). Throughout this book we will introduce variations on these theories, as well as new and evolving theoretical ideas in sociology.

**THE FUNCTIONALIST PARADIGM**

**Structural functionalism** (or functionalism—the term we use in this book) seeks to explain social organization and change in
Functionalism characterizes society in terms of the roles performed by different social structures, phenomena, and institutions. Functionalism characterizes society as made up of many interdependent parts—an analogy often cited is the human body. Each part serves a different function, but all parts work together to ensure the equilibrium and health of the entity as a whole. Society too is composed of a spectrum of different parts with a variety of different functions, such as the government, the family, religious and educational institutions, and the media. According to the theory, together these parts contribute to the smooth functioning and equilibrium of society.

The key question posed by the functionalist perspective is, “What function does a particular institution, phenomenon, or social group serve for the maintenance of society?” That is, what contribution does a given institution, phenomenon, or social group make to the equilibrium, stability, and functioning of the whole? Note the underlying assumption of functionalism: Any existing institution or phenomenon does serve a function; if it served no function, it would evolve out of existence. Consequently, the central task of the functionalist sociologist is to discover what function an institution or a phenomenon—such as the family, the government, religion, business, or a career—serves in the maintenance of the social order.

Émile Durkheim is credited with developing the early foundations of functionalism. Among other ideas, Durkheim observed that all known societies have some degree of deviant behavior, such as crime. The notion that deviance is functional for societies may seem counterintuitive: Ordinarily, we do not think of deviance as beneficial or necessary to society. Durkheim, however, reasoned that since deviance is universal, it must serve a social function—if it served no function, it would evolve out of existence. Consequently, the central task of the functionalist sociologist is to discover what function an institution or a phenomenon—for instance, the traditional family, capitalism, social stratification, or deviance—serves in the maintenance of the social order.

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) expanded functionalist analysis by looking at whole social systems such as government, the economy, and the family and how they contribute to the functioning of the whole social system (Parsons, 1964/2007, 1967). For example, he wrote that traditional sex roles for men and women contribute to stability on both the micro familial level and the macro societal level. Parsons argued that traditional socialization produces instrumental or rational and work-oriented males, and expressive or sensitive, nurturing, and emotional females. Instrumental males, he reasoned, are well suited for the competitive world of work, while their expressive female counterparts are appropriately prepared to care for the family. According to Parsons, these roles are complementary and positively functional, leading men and women to inhabit different spheres of the social world. Complementary rather than competing roles contribute to solidarity in a marriage by reducing competition between husband and wife. Critics have rejected this idea as a justification of inequality.

As this example suggests, functionalism is conservative in that it tends to accept rather than question the status quo; it holds that any given institution or phenomenon exists because it is functional for society, rather than asking whether it might benefit one group to the detriment of others, as critics say Parsons’s position on gender roles does. One of functionalism’s long-standing weaknesses is a failure to recognize inequalities in the distribution of power and resources and how those affect social relationships.

Robert Merton attempted to refine the functionalist paradigm by demonstrating that not all social structures work to maintain or strengthen the social organism, as Durkheim and other early functionalists seemed to suggest. According to Merton, a social institution or phenomenon can have both positive functions and problematic dysfunctions. Merton broadened the functionalist idea by suggesting that manifest functions

### Manifest functions

Manifest functions: Functions of an object, an institution, or a phenomenon that are obvious and intended.

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**TABLE 1.1 The Three Principal Sociological Paradigms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Perspective and Founding Theorist(s)</th>
<th>Structural Functionalism</th>
<th>Social Conflict</th>
<th>Symbolic Interactionism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions about self and society</td>
<td>Society is a system of interdependent, interrelated parts, like an organism, with groups and institutions contributing to the stability and equilibrium of the whole social system.</td>
<td>Society consists of conflicting interests, but only some groups have the power and resources to realize their interests. Some groups benefit from the social order at the expense of other groups.</td>
<td>The self is a social creation; social interaction occurs by means of symbols such as words, gestures, and adornments; shared meanings are important to successful social interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key focus and questions</td>
<td>Macrosociology: What keeps society operating smoothly? What functions do different societal institutions and phenomena serve for society as a whole?</td>
<td>Macrosociology: What are the sources of conflict in society? Who benefits and who loses from the existing social order? How can inequalities be overcome?</td>
<td>Microsociology: How do individuals experience themselves, one another, and society as a whole? How do they interpret the meanings of particular social interactions?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Latent functions, by contrast, are functions that are not recognized or expected. A manifest function of war, for instance, is usually to vanquish an enemy, perhaps to defend a territory or to claim it. Latent functions of war—those that are not the overt purpose but may still have powerful effects—may include increased patriotism in countries engaged in the war, a rise in the profits of companies manufacturing military equipment or contracting workers to the military, and changes in national budgetary priorities.

THE SOCIAL CONFLICT PARADIGM

In contrast to functionalism, the social conflict paradigm (which we refer to in this book as conflict theory) seeks to explain social organization and change in terms of the conflict built into social relationships. Conflict theory is rooted in the ideas about class and power put forth by Karl Marx. While Durkheim's structural functionalist lens asked how different parts of society contribute to stability, Marx asked about the roots of conflict. Conflict theorists pose the questions “Who benefits from the way social institutions and relationships are structured?” and “Who loses?” The social conflict paradigm focuses on what divides people rather than on what unites them. It presumes that group interests (such as social class interests) drive relationships, and that various groups in society (for instance, social classes or genders or ethnic or racial groups) will act in their own interests. Conflict theory thus assumes not that interests are shared but rather that they may be irreconcilable and, importantly, that only some groups have the power and resources to realize their interests. Because of this, conflict is—sooner or later—inevitable.

From Marx’s perspective, the bourgeoisie benefits directly from the capitalist social order. If, as Marx suggests, the capitalist class has an interest in maximizing productivity and profit and minimizing costs (like the cost of labor in the form of workers’ wages), and the working class has an interest in earning more and working less, then the interests of the two classes are difficult to reconcile. The more powerful group in society generally has the upper hand in furthering its interests.

After Marx, the body of conflict theory expanded tremendously. In the 20th century and today, theorists have extended the reach of the perspective to consider, for instance, how control of culture and the rise of technology (rather than just control of

Latent functions: Functions of an object, an institution, or a phenomenon that are not recognized or expected.

Social conflict paradigm: A theory that seeks to explain social organization and change in terms of the conflict that is built into social relations; also known as conflict theory.
INEQUALITY MATTERS

WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE POOR AND OTHERS RICH?

The concentration of wealth in the hands of a small elite and the widespread struggle of millions to make do with scant resources are critical issues on both the domestic and global levels. One common explanation of the wealth disparity in the United States is that it results from individual differences in talent and ambition. While such factors play a role, the fact that more than 15% of the population lives below the poverty line, including disproportionate numbers of Blacks, Latinos, and women (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2012), should lead our sociological imaginations to recognize that social and economic forces also underlie inequality.

Discrimination can place entire groups of people at an economic disadvantage. Women as a group continue to earn less than men as a group—as do Blacks and Latinos relative to White Americans. Importantly as well, educational opportunity is not equally distributed, because in most U.S. states schools are still funded primarily by local property taxes; consequently, high-value areas have more funds than low-value areas to spend on teachers, textbooks, and technology. Without a strong educational foundation that prepares them for a competitive economy, already poor children are likely to remain poor as adults.

Economic changes have also spurred the growth of inequality. Automation and the movement abroad of factory work have significantly reduced employment opportunities for less educated workers. Service jobs, including restaurant and retail work, have expanded as the manufacturing sector has contracted, but these positions are far less likely to pay a living wage or give workers a lift into the middle class. Education is thus more critical than ever, but poor children are the least likely to get the solid skills they need to succeed.

THINK IT THROUGH

In his inaugural address of 2013, President Obama stated that one of his goals in his second term as president was to see that a young girl born into poverty would know that she had every opportunity to realize her hopes. How are such opportunities created and expanded? What do you think?

Why are children of poor parents more likely to be poor as adults? This is a question of fundamental interest to sociologists.

Recall Durkheim’s functionalist analysis of crime and deviance. According to this perspective, society defines crime to reaffirm people’s beliefs about what is right and dissuade them from deviating. A conflict theorist might argue that dominant groups in society define the behaviors labeled criminal or deviant because they have the power to do so. For example, street crimes such as mugging someone to get his wallet and carjacking

the means of production) underpins class domination (Adorno, 1975; Horkheimer, 1947), as well as how the expanded middle class can be accommodated in a Marxist perspective (Wright, 1998). Some of feminist theory’s key ideas also reflect a conflict-oriented perspective, though the focus shifts from social class to gender power and conflict (Connell, 2005), as well as ways in which race is implicated in relations of power (Collins, 1990).
are clearly defined and punished as criminal behavior. They are also amply represented in reality television programs, movies, and other cultural products as images of criminal deviance. On the other hand, corporate or white-collar crime, which may cause the loss of money or even of lives, is less likely to be clearly defined, represented, and punished as criminal. From a conflict perspective, white-collar crime is more likely to be committed by members of the upper class (for instance, business or political leaders or financiers) and is less likely to be punished harshly than street crime, which is associated with the lower-income classes, though white-collar crime may have even greater economic and health consequences. A social conflict theorist would draw our attention to the fact that the decision makers who pass our laws are mostly members of the upper class and govern in the interests of capitalism and their own socioeconomic peers.

A key weakness of the social conflict paradigm is that it overlooks the forces of stability, equilibrium, and consensus in society. The assumption that groups have conflicting, even irreconcilable, interests and that those interests are realized by those with power at the expense of those with less power fails to account for forces of cohesion and stability in societies.

**SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM**

Symbolic interactionism argues that both the individual self and society as a whole are the products of social interactions based on language and other symbols. The term symbolic interactionism was coined by U.S. sociologist Herbert Blumer (1900–1987) in 1937, but the approach originated in the lectures of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), a University of Chicago philosopher allied with the Chicago School of sociology. The symbolic interactionist paradigm argues that people acquire their sense of who they are only through interaction with others. They do this by means of symbols, representations of things that are not immediately present to our senses. Symbols include such things as words, gestures, emoticons, and tattoos, among others.

Recall our earlier discussions of the theoretical interpretations of deviance and crime. A symbolic interactionist might focus on the ways in which people label one another as deviant (a symbolic act that uses language), the factors that make such a label stick, and the meanings underlying such a label. If you are accused of committing a crime you did not commit, how will the label of “criminal” affect the way others see you? How will it affect the way you see yourself, and will you begin to act differently as a result? Can being labeled “deviant” be a self-fulfilling prophecy? For the symbolic interactionist, sociological inquiry is the study of how people interact and how they create and interpret symbols in the social world.

While symbolic interactionist perspectives draw our attention to important micro-level processes in society, they may miss the larger structural context of those processes, such as discovering who has the power to make laws defining what or who is deviant. For this reason, many sociologists seek to utilize both macro- and micro-level perspectives when analyzing social phenomena such as deviance.

The three paradigms described above lead to diverse images of society, research questions, and conclusions about the patterns and nature of social life. Each “pair of glasses” can provide a different perspective on the social world. Throughout this text, the three major theoretical paradigms—and some new ones we will encounter in later chapters—will help us understand key issues and themes of sociology.

**Principal Themes in This Text**

We began this chapter with a list of why questions with which sociologists are concerned—and about which any one of us might be curious. Behind these questions, we find several major themes, which are also some of the main themes in this book. Three important themes for sociology—and for us—are (1) power and inequality and the ways in which the unequal distribution of social, economic, and political power and resources shapes opportunities, obstacles, and relationships; (2) the societal changes occurring as a result of globalization and the rising social diversity of modern societies; and (3) the powerful impact of technological change on modern lives, institutions, and states.

**Power and Inequality**

As we consider broad social topics such as gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation and their effects on social relationships and resources, we will be asking who has power—the ability to mobilize resources and achieve goals despite the resistance of others—and who does not. We will also ask about variables that influence the uneven distribution of power, and how some groups use power to create advantages for themselves (and disadvantages for others) and how disadvantaged groups mobilize to challenge the powerful.

Power is often distributed unequally and can be used by those who possess it to marginalize other social groups. Inequality refers to differences in wealth, power, opportunity, and other valued resources. The existence of inequality not only raises moral and ethical questions about fairness; it can tear at the very fabric of societies, fostering social alienation and instability. It may also have negative effects on local and national economies. Notably, economic inequality is increasing both within and between many countries around the globe, a fact that makes understanding the

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**Symbolic interactionism**: A microsociological perspective that posits that both the individual self and society as a whole are the products of social interactions based on language and other symbols.

**Symbols**: Representations of things that are not immediately present to our senses.

**Power**: The ability to mobilize resources and achieve goals despite the resistance of others.

**Inequality**: Differences in wealth, power, and other valued resources.
roots and consequences of this phenomenon—that is, asking the why questions—ever more important.

GLOBALIZATION AND DIVERSITY

Globalization is the process by which people all over the planet become increasingly interconnected economically, politically, culturally, and environmentally. Globalization is not new. It began nearly 200,000 years ago when humans first spread from their African cradle into Europe and Asia. For thousands of years, humans have traveled, traded goods, and exchanged ideas over much of the globe, using seaways or land routes such as the famed Silk Road, a stretch of land that links China and Europe. But the rate of globalization took a giant leap forward with the Industrial Revolution, which accelerated the growth of global trade. It made another dramatic jump with the advent of the information age, drawing together individuals, cultures, and countries into a common global web of information exchange. In this book, we consider the variable manifestations, functions, and consequences of globalization in areas like the economy, culture, and the environment.

Growing contacts between people and cultures have made us increasingly aware of social diversity as a feature of modern societies. Social diversity is the social and cultural mixture of different groups in society and the societal recognition of difference as significant. The spread of culture through the globalization of media and the rise of migration has created a world in which virtually no place is isolated. As a result, many nations today, including the United States, are characterized by a high degree of social diversity.

Social diversity brings a unique set of sociological challenges. People everywhere have a tendency toward ethnocentrism, a worldview whereby they judge other cultures by the standards of their own culture and regard their own way of life as “normal” and better than others. From a sociological perspective, no group can be said to be more human than any other. Yet history abounds with examples of people lashing out at others whose religions, languages, customs, races, or sexual orientations differed from their own.

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

Technology is the practical application of knowledge to transform natural resources for human use. The first human technology was probably the use of rocks and other blunt instruments as weapons, enabling humans to hunt large animals for food. Agriculture—planting crops such as rice or corn in hopes of reaping a yearly harvest—represents another technological advance; one superior to simple foraging in the wild for nuts and berries. The use of modern machinery, which ushered in the Industrial Revolution, represents still another technological leap, multiplying the productivity of human efforts.

Today we are in the midst of another revolutionary period of technological change: the information revolution. Thanks to the microchip, the Internet, and mobile technology, an increasing number of people around the world now have instant access to a mass of information that was unimaginable just 10 or 20 years ago. The information revolution is creating postindustrial economies based far more heavily on the production of knowledge than on the production of goods, as well as new ways of communicating that have the potential to draw people around the world together—or tear them apart.

WHY STUDY SOCIOLOGY?

A sociological perspective highlights the many ways that we both influence and are powerfully influenced by the social world around us: Society shapes us, and we, in turn, shape society. A sociological perspective also helps us to see the social world through a variety of different lenses (recall the glasses metaphor we used when talking about theory): Sociologists might explain class differences and why they persist, for instance, in many different ways. Each one may illuminate particular aspects of the phenomenon, enabling us to assemble a fuller, more rigorous perspective on social life. In this sense, “the” sociological perspective is really a collection of sociological perspectives we can use as analytical tools.

Why are the issues and questions posed by sociology incredibly compelling for all of us to understand? One reason is that, as we will see throughout this book, many of the social issues sociologists study—marriage, fertility, poverty, unemployment, consumption, discrimination, and many others—are related to one another in ways we may not immediately see. The sociological perspective helps us to make connections between diverse social phenomena. When we understand these connections, we are better able to address social problems and to make (or vote for) policy choices that benefit society.

For example, a phenomenon like the decline of marriage among the working class, which we mentioned at the start of the chapter, is related to growing globalization, declining employment in the manufacturing sector, and the persistently high rate of poverty among single mothers. Consider these social phenomena as pieces of a puzzle. One of the defining characteristics of economic globalization is the movement of manufacturing industries away from the United States to lower-wage countries. As a result, jobs in U.S. manufacturing, an economic sector dominated by men, have been declining since the 1970s. The decreasing number of less educated men able to earn a good enough wage to support a family in turn is related to a decline in marriage among the working class.
GLOBAL ISSUES

YOU, THE GLOBAL CONSUMER

Try a simple experiment. Walk through your dorm room, apartment, or house and make a list of the places of manufacture of some of the products you find. Be sure to examine electronic equipment such as your television, laptop, or smartphone. Go through your closets and drawers, checking the labels on your clothing and footwear. What about your bicycle or your car? If you are a good detective, you will find that people who live outside the United States made many of the necessities of your everyday life. Even your U.S.-manufactured car is likely to have parts that have passed through the hands of workers abroad.

According to a recent story in the New York Times, fully 90% of footwear sold in the United States is manufactured elsewhere (Manning, 2009). So much of our apparel is made abroad that some student groups have campaigned to ensure that the college apparel marketed by their schools is not made in sweatshops. United Students Against Sweatshops (www.usas.org) now has chapters across the United States.

While global production based on the use of low-wage labor around the world has reduced the prices of many things we consume, it has also contributed to declining wages and lost jobs for manufacturing workers in the United States, as well as the employment of millions of people around the world in factories that are poorly regulated and operate largely outside the view of the consumers who buy their products. On one hand, these new industrial workers potentially benefit from expanded job opportunities. On the other hand, the world’s workers, many of whom are women, are vulnerable to exploitation and their wages are often very low, their hours long, and their work sites unpleasant or even hazardous. The conditions under which some workers toil today recall the 19th-century English factories that inspired Karl Marx to advance his powerful critique of capitalism's darker side.

THINK IT THROUGH

► Many questions remain for sociological investigation: Who benefits and who loses as a result of the explosive growth in global production? Will globalization bring a better world to all or to only a select few? What is our role as consumers in the global chain of production, and how do our consumption choices affect industries and economies at home and abroad?

While marriage rates fall, however, many women still desire to have families, so the proportion of nonmarital births rises. Single mothers with children are among the demographic groups in the United States most likely to be poor, and their poverty rate has remained relatively high even in periods of economic prosperity.

While the relationships between sociological factors are complex and sometimes indirect, when sociology helps us fit them together, we gain a better picture of the issues confronting all of us—as well as U.S. society and the larger world. Let’s begin our journey.
The Internet, which has revolutionized the way the world shares information, is barely four decades old. The first Internet message was sent from the University of California, Los Angeles, to Stanford University in 1969 on a small, experimental Department of Defense network. The initial effort experienced a glitch—the system reportedly crashed as the letter G of the word LOGIN was typed! Not until the mid-1980s was Internet technology sufficiently developed to make it possible for anyone with a computer to plug into the network. Since it was initially difficult to send anything more than simple text-based messages, the early Internet was used mainly by a handful of researchers and scholars.

Part-time University of Illinois programmer Marc Andreessen developed the easy-to-use World Wide Web, with its graphical interface and ability to send sound and images, in 1992. Andreessen called his new program Mosaic and gave it away free on the Internet. Within a year and a half, the number of Internet users had tripled to 20 million, and Mosaic had morphed into the Netscape browser. In 1998, Netscape spun off Mozilla, a company that today maintains the Firefox browser. In the summer of 2000, there were 93 million Internet hosts worldwide. By the summer of 2012 there were 908 million and counting, along with about 200 million active websites. In 2014 it was projected that 44% of households worldwide would have Internet access by the end of that year, and there would be almost 3 billion Internet users. The rate of growth shows no signs of slowing (International Telecommunication Union, 2011, 2014; Internet Systems Consortium, 2012; Netcraft, 2012).

A recent study by the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project estimated that 90% of U.S. adults own some type of portable electronic device (Gahran, 2012). As you pass through a public space such as an airport or a mall or ride on public transportation in a metropolitan area, you see people engaging in a multitude of behaviors and activities facilitated by the growth of high-tech gadgetry. Social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Tumblr allow individuals across the globe to post videos and other media to share within the Internet community of millions.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

* Will such widely accessible and vastly powerful technology enable people to play a greater role in shaping their own destinies? Will digital technology be emancipating, or will it come to threaten our privacy and security in ways we cannot yet grasp?
What Can I Do With a Sociology Degree?

CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND SKILLS AND CAREERS: AN INTRODUCTION

A short feature will appear near the end of each chapter of Discover Sociology that links your study of sociology to potential careers. It is intended to help you answer the question “What can I do with a sociology degree?” An important goal of these features is to highlight the core knowledge and professional skills that you will develop through your education as a sociology major. This set of competencies and skills, which range from critical thinking and writing skills to aptitude in qualitative and quantitative research to the understanding of diversity and conflict dynamics, prepares you for the workforce, as well as for graduate and professional school. Many of the chapters ahead will highlight information about the occupational fields, job titles, and work activities that can be linked to the knowledge and skills you will learn as a sociology major. The Skills and Careers essays (Chapters 5–11 and 14–17) will describe professional skills, discuss their development through the study of sociology, and link them with specific occupational fields and jobs in which employers seek employees who have the skills discussed.

A second goal of the feature is to help you more fully identify and articulate your current and developing job-related skills, interests, and values, as well as to show you how to begin to explore careers, how to perform an effective internship or job search, and how to create a personal career action plan (see the career development wheel). These Career Development features are intended to benefit both sociology majors and students majoring in other disciplines—career planning is important no matter your chosen field. The first chapter essays (Chapters 2–4) discuss the basics of career development. Two later chapters (Chapters 12 and 13) offer discussions of how graduate or professional school may fit into your career development plans. We hope that you find these features useful!

THINK ABOUT CAREERS

► What are your potential career interests? Did you come to college with a specific interest, or have you developed new interests during your studies?

► Have you spoken with anyone—family members, career counselors, professors, practitioners, or others—about your career interests? With whom might you speak to learn more about your field of interest?

Anne V. Scammon, Managing Director, Curricular and Strategic Initiatives, Center for Career Services at the George Washington University in Washington, DC, contributed to the skills and careers feature (“What Can I Do with a Sociology Degree?”) in this text and accompanying online supplements. With Anne Scammon’s support, key skills developed through the study of sociology were identified and linked to specific job titles and occupations. She also developed information related to career self-assessment, exploration, obtaining experience, job search strategies, and graduate school options for students.
SUMMARY

- **Sociology** is the scientific study of human social relationships, groups, and societies. Its central task is to ask what the dimensions of the social world are, how they influence our behavior, and how we in turn shape and change them.

- Sociology adheres to the principle of **social embeddedness**, the idea that economic, political, and other forms of human behavior are fundamentally shaped by social relationships. Sociologists seek to study through scientific means the social worlds that human beings consciously create.

- The **sociological imagination** is the ability to grasp the relationship between our individual lives and the larger social forces that help to shape them. It helps us see the connections between our private lives and public issues.

- **Critical thinking** is the ability to evaluate claims about truth by using reason and evidence. Often we accept things as true because they are familiar, seem to mesh with our own experiences, and sound right. Critical thinking instead asks us to recognize poor arguments, reject statements not supported by evidence, and even question our own assumptions.

- Sociology’s roots can be traced to the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, industrialization and the birth of modern capitalism, and the urbanization of populations. Sociology emerged in part as a tool to enable people to understand dramatic changes taking place in modern societies.

- Sociology generally traces its classical roots to Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. Early work in sociology reflected the concerns of the men who founded the discipline.

- In the United States, scholars at the University of Chicago focused on reforming social problems stemming from industrialization and urbanization. Women and people of color worked on the margins of the discipline because of persistent discrimination.

- Sociologists base their study of the social world on different theoretical perspectives that shape theory and guide research, often resulting in different conclusions. The major sociological paradigms are **structural functionalism**, the **social conflict paradigm**, and **symbolic interactionism**.

- Major themes in sociology include the distribution of **power** and growing inequality, **globalization** and its accompanying social changes, the growth of **social diversity**, and the way advances in **technology** have changed communication, commerce, and communities.

- The early founders of sociology believed that scientific knowledge could lead to shared social progress. Some modern sociologists question whether such shared scientific understanding is indeed possible.

KEY TERMS

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think about Mills’s concept of the sociological imagination and its ambition to draw together what Mills called private troubles and public issues. Think of a private trouble that sociologists might classify as also being a public issue. Share your example with your classmates.

2. What is critical thinking? What does it mean to be a critical thinker in our approach to understanding society and social issues or problems?

3. In the chapter, we asked why there were so few “founding mothers” in sociology. What factors explain the dearth of women’s voices? What about the lack of minority voices? What effects do you think these factors may have had on the development of the discipline?

4. What is theory? What is its function in the discipline of sociology?

5. Recall the three key theoretical paradigms discussed in this chapter—structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Discuss the ways these diverse “glasses” analyze deviance, its labeling, and its punishment in society. Try applying a similar analysis to another social phenomenon, such as class inequality or traditional gender roles.

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