The sociological perspective shows us that the society around us influences how we act and even what we think and how we feel. Learning to see the world sociologically is useful in many ways—and it is also fun!
The Sociological Perspective
When it comes to love, the decisions people make do not simply result from the process philosophers call “free will.” Sociology teaches us that the social world guides all our life choices in much the same way that the seasons influence our choice of clothing.

The Sociological Perspective

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

Seeing the General in the Particular

Years ago, Peter Berger (1963) described the sociological perspective as seeing the general in the particular. By this he meant that sociologists look for general patterns in the behavior of particular people. Although every individual is unique, a society shapes the lives of people in various categories (such as children and adults, women and men, the rich and the poor) very differently. We begin to see the world sociologically by realizing how the general categories into which we fall shape our particular life experiences.

For example, does social class position affect what women look for in a spouse? In a classic study of women’s hopes for their marriages, Lillian Rubin (1976) found that higher-income women typically expected the men they married to be sensitive to others, to talk readily, and to share feelings and experiences. Lower-income women, she found, had very different expectations and were looking for men who did not drink too much, were not violent, and held steady jobs. Obviously, what women expect in a marriage partner has a lot to do with social class position.

This text explores the power of society to guide our actions, thoughts, and feelings. We may think that marriage results simply from the personal feelings of love. Yet the sociological perspective shows us that factors such as age, sex, race, and social class guide our selection of a partner. It might be more accurate to think of love as a feeling we have for others who match up with what society teaches us to want in a mate.
What effect did your social class background have on your decision to go to college? How do you think your background shapes the kind of job you expect to have after you graduate?

The Sociological Perspective CHAPTER 1

Seeing the Strange in the Familiar

At first, using the sociological perspective may seem like seeing the strange in the familiar. Consider how you might react if someone were to say to you, “You fit all the right categories, which means you would make a wonderful spouse!” We are used to thinking that people fall in love and decide to marry based on personal feelings. But the sociological perspective reveals the initially strange idea that society shapes what we think and do.

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

“I wanted to stay close to home.”
“I got a basketball scholarship.”
“With a journalism degree from this university, I can get a good job.”
“My girlfriend goes to school here.”
“I didn’t get into the school I really wanted to attend.”

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

Thinking sociologically about going to college, it’s important to realize that only about 5 out of every 100 people in the world earn a college degree, with the enrollment rate much higher in high-income nations than in poor countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008; World Bank, 2008). Even in the United States a century ago, going to college was not an option for most people. Today, going to college is within the reach of far more people. But a look around the classroom shows that social forces still have much to do with who goes to college. For instance, most U.S. college students are young, generally between eighteen and about thirty. Why? Because in our society, attending college is linked to this period of life. But more than age is involved, because fewer than half of all young men and women actually end up on campus.

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

GLOBAL MAP 1–1  Women’s Childbearing in Global Perspective

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


Seeing Society in Our Everyday Lives

To see how society shapes personal choices, consider the number of children women have. As shown in Global Map 1–1, the average woman in the United States has about two children during her lifetime. In India, however, the average is about three; in Guatemala, about four; in Ethiopia, about five; in Yemen, about six; and in Niger, the average woman has seven children (United Nations Development Programme, 2007).

What accounts for these striking differences? Because poor countries provide women with less schooling and fewer economic opportunities, women’s lives are centered in the home, and they are less...
likely to use contraception. Clearly, society has much to do with the decisions women and men make about childbearing.

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

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

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

A century later, Durkheim’s analysis still holds true. Figure 1–1 shows suicide rates for various categories of people in the United States. Keep in mind that suicide is very rare—a rate of 10 suicides for every 100,000 people is about the same as 6 inches in a mile. Even so, we can see some interesting patterns. In 2005, there were 12.3 recorded suicides for every 100,000 white people, more than twice the rate for African Americans (5.1). For both races, suicide was more common among men than among women. White men (19.7) were more than four times as likely as white women (5.0) to take their own lives. Among African Americans, the rate for men (8.7) was about five times higher than for women (1.8) (Kung et al., 2008). Applying Durkheim’s logic, the higher suicide rate among white people and men reflects their greater wealth and freedom, just as the lower rate among women and African Americans reflects their limited social choices. As Durkheim did a century ago, we can see general patterns in the personal actions of particular individuals.

**Seeing Sociologically: Marginality and Crisis**

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

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

For example, no African American grows up in the United States without understanding the importance of race in shaping people’s lives. Rap lyrics by groups such as Three 6 Mafia, who say that they “Done seen people killed, done seen people deal, done seen people live in poverty with no meals,” show that some people of color—especially African Americans living in the inner city—feel like their hopes and dreams are crushed by society. But white people, as the dominant majority, think less often about race and the privileges it provides, believing that race affects only people of color and not themselves as well. People at the margins of social life, including women, gay people, people with disabilities, and the very old, are aware of social patterns that others rarely think about. To become better at using the sociological perspective, we must step back from our familiar routines and look at our lives with a new curiosity.

Periods of change or crisis make everyone feel a little off balance, encouraging us to use the sociological perspective. The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) illustrated this idea using the Great Depression of the 1930s. As the unemployment rate soared to 25 percent, people who were out of work could not help but see general social forces at work in their particular lives. Rather than saying,
The Importance of a Global Perspective

December 10, Fes, Morocco. This medieval city—a web of narrow streets and alleyways—is alive with the laughter of playing children, the silence of veiled women, and the steady gaze of men leading donkeys loaded with goods. Fes seems to have changed little over the centuries. Here, in northwestern Africa, we are just a few hundred miles from the more familiar rhythms of Europe. Yet this place seems a thousand years away. Never have we had such an adventure! Never have we thought so much about home!

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

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

The world’s 194 nations can be divided into three broad categories according to their level of economic development (see Global Map 12–1 on page 303). High-income countries are the nations with the highest overall standards of living. The sixty-six countries in this category include the United States and Canada, Argentina, the nations of Western Europe, South Africa, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Australia. Taken together, these nations produce most of the world’s goods and services, and the people who live there own most of the planet’s wealth. Economically speaking, people in these countries are very well off, not because they are smarter or work harder than anyone else but because they were lucky enough to be born in a rich region of the world.

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

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

“Something must be wrong with me; I can’t find a job,” they took a sociological approach and realized, “The economy has collapsed; there are no jobs to be found!” Mills believed that using what he called the “sociological imagination” in this way helps people understand not only their society but also their own lives, because the two are closely related. The Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life box takes a closer look.

Just as social change encourages sociological thinking, sociological thinking can bring about social change. The more we learn about how “the system” operates, the more we may want to change it in some way. Becoming aware of the power of gender, for example, has caused many women and men to try to reduce gender inequality in our society.
The Sociological Perspective
CHAPTER 1

MAKING THE GRADE

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

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

SEEING SOCIOLOGY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

As Mike opened the envelope, he felt the tightness in his chest. The letter he dreaded was in his hands—his job was finished at the end of the day. After eleven years! Years in which he had worked hard, sure that he would move up in the company. All those hopes and dreams were now suddenly gone. Mike felt like a failure. Anger at himself—for not having worked even harder, for having wasted eleven years of his life in what had turned out to be a dead-end job—grew inside him.

But as he returned to his work station to pack his things, Mike soon realized that he was not alone. Almost all his colleagues in the tech support group had received the same letter. Their jobs were moving to India, where the company was able to provide telephone tech support for less than half the cost of keeping workers in California.

By the end of the weekend, Mike was sitting in the living room with a dozen other ex-employees. Comparing notes and sharing ideas, they now realized that they were simply a few of the victims of a massive outsourcing of jobs that is part of what analysts call the “globalization of the economy.”

In good times and bad, the power of the sociological perspective lies in making sense of our individual lives. We see that many of our particular problems (and our successes, as well) are not unique to us, but are the result of larger social trends. Half a century ago, sociologist C. Wright Mills pointed to the power of what he called the sociological imagination to help us understand everyday events. As he saw it, society—not people’s personal failings—is the main cause of poverty and other social problems. By turning personal problems into public issues, the sociological imagination also is the key to bringing people together to create needed change.

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

When society becomes industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change. . . .

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

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

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. As Mills sees it, how are personal troubles different from public issues? Explain this difference in terms of what happened to Mike in the story above.
2. Living in the United States, why do we often blame ourselves for the personal problems we face?
3. By using the sociological imagination, how do we gain the power to change the world?

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

Chapter 12 (“Global Stratification”) explains the causes and consequences of global wealth and poverty. But every chapter of this text makes comparisons between the United States and other nations for four reasons:

1. **Where we live shapes the lives we lead.** As we saw in Global Map 1–1 on page 4, women living in rich and poor countries have very different lives, as suggested by the number of children they have. To understand ourselves and appreciate how others live, we must understand something about how countries differ, which is one good reason to pay attention to the global maps found throughout this text.

2. **Societies throughout the world are increasingly interconnected.** Historically, people in the United States took only passing note of the countries beyond our own borders. In recent decades, however, the United States and the rest of the world have become linked as never before. Electronic technology now transmits sounds, pictures, and written documents around the globe in seconds.
One effect of new technology is that people the world over now share many tastes in food, clothing, and music. Rich countries such as the United States influence other nations, whose people are ever more likely to gobble up our Big Macs and Whoppers, dance to the latest hip-hop music, and speak English.

But the larger world also has an impact on us. We all know the contributions of famous immigrants such as Arnold Schwarzenegger (who came to the United States from Austria) and Gloria Estefan (who came from Cuba). About 1.5 million immigrants enter the United States each year, bringing their skills and talents, along with their fashions and foods, greatly increasing the racial and cultural diversity of this country (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2008b).

Trade across national boundaries has also created a global economy. Large corporations make and market goods worldwide. Stock traders in New York pay close attention to the financial markets in Tokyo and Hong Kong even as wheat farmers in Kansas watch the price of grain in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. Because most new U.S. jobs involve international trade, global understanding has never been more important.

3. **Many social problems that we face in the United States are far more serious elsewhere.** Poverty is a serious problem in the United States, but as Chapter 12 (“Global Stratification”) explains, poverty in Latin America, Africa, and Asia is both more common and more serious. In the same way, although women have lower social standing than men in the United States, gender inequality is even greater in the world’s poor countries.

4. **Thinking globally helps us learn more about ourselves.** We cannot walk the streets of a distant city without thinking about what it means to live in the United States. Comparing life in various settings also leads to unexpected lessons. For instance, in Chapter 12, we visit a squatter settlement in Chennai, India. There, despite desperate poverty, people thrive in the love and support of family members. Why, then, are so many poor people in our own country angry and alone? Are material things—so central to our definition of a “rich” life—the best way to measure human well-being?

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

Applying the sociological perspective is useful in many ways. First, sociology is at work guiding many of the laws and policies that shape our lives. Second, on an individual level, making use of the sociological perspective leads to important personal growth and expanded awareness. Third, studying sociology is excellent preparation for the world of work.

Sociology and Public Policy

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

Sociology and Personal Growth

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

1. The sociological perspective helps us assess the truth of “common sense.” We all take many things for granted, but that does not make them true. One good example is the idea that we are free individuals who are personally responsible for our own lives. If we think we decide our own fate, we may be quick to praise very successful people as superior and consider others with fewer achievements personally deficient. A sociological approach, by contrast, encourages us to ask whether such common beliefs are actually true and, to the extent that they are not, why they are so widely held. The Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life box on page 10 gives an example of how the sociological perspective sometimes makes us rethink commonsense ideas about other people.

2. The sociological perspective helps us see the opportunities and constraints in our lives. Sociological thinking leads us to see that in the game of life, we have a say in how to play our cards, but it is society that deals us the hand. The more we understand the game, the better players we will be. Sociology helps us learn more about the world so that we can pursue our goals more effectively.

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

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

Careers: The “Sociology Advantage”

Most students at colleges and universities today are very interested in getting a good job. A background in sociology is excellent preparation for the working world. Of course, completing a bachelor’s degree in sociology is the right choice for people who decide they would like to go
SEEING SOCIOLOGY in Everyday Life

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

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

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

Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) had her doubts. To find out what the world of low-wage work is really like, the successful journalist and author decided to leave her comfortable middle-class life to live and work in the world of low-wage jobs. She began in Key West, Florida, taking a job as a waitress for $2.43 an hour plus tips. Right away, she found out that she had to work much harder than she ever imagined. By the end of a shift, she was exhausted, but after sharing tips with the kitchen staff, she averaged less than $6.00 an hour. This was barely above the minimum wage at the time and provided just enough income to pay the rent on her tiny apartment, buy food, and cover other basic expenses. She had to hope that she didn’t get sick, because the job did not provide health insurance and she couldn’t afford to pay for a visit to a doctor’s office.

After working for more than a year at a number of other low-wage jobs, including cleaning motels in Maine and working on the floor of a Walmart in Minnesota, she had rejected quite a bit of “common sense.” First, she now knew that tens of millions of people with low-wage jobs work very hard every day. If you don’t think so, Ehrenreich says, try one of these jobs yourself. Second, these jobs require not just hard work (imagine thoroughly cleaning three motel rooms per hour all day long) but also special skills and real intelligence (try waiting on ten tables in a restaurant at the same time and keeping everybody happy). She found that the people she worked with were, on average, just as smart, clever, and funny as those she knew who wrote books for a living or taught at a college.

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

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

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

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When sociologists work, much as clinical psychologists do, with the goal of improving the lives of troubled clients. A basic difference is that sociologists focus on difficulties not in the personality but in the individual’s web of social relationships.

But sociology is not just for people who want to be sociologists. People who work in criminal justice—in police departments, probation offices, and correction facilities—gain the “sociology advantage” by learning which categories of people are most at risk of becoming criminals as well as victims, how effective various policies and programs are at preventing crime, and why people turn to crime in the first place. Similarly, people who work in health care—including doctors, nurses, and technicians—also gain a sociology advantage by learning about patterns of health and illness within the population, as well as how factors such as race, gender, and social class affect human health.

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

The Origins of Sociology

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

Social Change and Sociology

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

A New Industrial Economy

During the Middle Ages in Europe, most people plowed fields near their homes or worked in small-scale manufacturing (a term derived from Latin words meaning “to make by hand”). By the end of the eighteenth century, inventors used new sources of energy—the power of moving water and then steam—to operate large machines in mills and factories. Instead of laboring at home or in small groups, workers became part of a large and anonymous labor force, under the control of strangers who owned the factories. This change in the system of production took people out of their homes, weakening the traditions that had guided community life for centuries.

The Growth of Cities

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

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

Political Change

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

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

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

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

A New Awareness of Society

Huge factories, exploding cities, a new spirit of individualism—these changes combined to make people more aware of their surroundings. The new discipline of sociology was born in England, France, and Germany—precisely where the changes were greatest.
Interest in Military on the Rise

By DAVID MONTERO
February 2, 2009

Across the street from the U.S. Navy recruiting station in Aurora [Colorado] is a restaurant that has gone out of business. Less than a mile away, bankrupt Circuit City is unloading its merchandise at deep discounts.

Inside the narrow office, four recruiters and two freshly minted recruits are talking about what seems like the topic on most Americans’ minds: jobs and the economy.

Troy Torreysen, wearing a blue Navy hat and a white T-shirt that reads, "Property of the U.S. Navy," can’t wait to start basic training in May. The 30-year-old is scheduled to go to the Great Lakes naval facility in Illinois for nine weeks and after that will train to be a Navy corpsman.

He wants to be in nursing care, but the economy sidetracked those plans for awhile.

"It’s a huge issue," he said. "I have a culinary arts degree and I work at Burger King right now. I can’t find a job."

Chief Petty Officer Mario Laracuente has heard similar tales before. He’s been hearing it for months actually, ever since the economy went south. People getting laid off. People having trouble finding work and making ends meet. People looking for a [bit] of stability.

Laracuente believes the military is well-positioned in this environment to meet and exceed recruiting goals—even as the United States continues to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"You can sense that as the economy appears more unstable, people are looking at the military more," Laracuente said.

Stable jobs attractive
All branches of the military are showing strong recruiting numbers with the flagging economy.

The last reporting period for December showed the Army and Marine Corps exceeding recruitment goals, reaching 115 percent and 113 percent of their goals, respectively. The Air Force and Navy met their targets as well. Those results came as private employers made sweeping rounds of layoffs. In December, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that unemployment rates increased from 6.8 percent to 7.2 percent. . . .

Finding refuge in the military during tough economic times isn’t unusual. Safe harbors can often be found in government and the military, which accounts for about a fifth of the nation’s budget and is set at $15 billion for fiscal year 2009.

Gordon Von Stroh, professor of management at the University of Denver, said the lure of incentive-laden deals offered by the military coupled with staggering job losses make for plum pickings among military recruiters.

“They get a larger pool of people and can be more selective,” he said. “For the applicants, they see an opportunity to train in some fairly advanced fields while having the job stability provided by the military.”

Job dries up
Mark Sabatino got laid off last week from his job as a commercial sign installer . . . . The 22-year-old from Arvada had thought about the

Science and Sociology

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

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

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

Comte (1975, orig. 1851–54) saw sociology as the product of a three-stage historical development. During the earliest, the theological stage, from the beginning of human history to the end of the European Middle Ages about 1350 C.E., people took a religious view that society expressed God’s will.

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

What Comte called the scientific stage of history began with the work of early scientists such as the Polish astronomer Copernicus (1473–1543), the Italian astronomer and physicist Galileo (1564–1642), and the English physicist and mathematician Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Comte’s contribution came in applying the scientific approach—first used to study the physical world—to the study of society.2

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

2Illustrating Comte’s stages, the ancient Greeks and Romans viewed the planets as gods; Renaissance metaphysical thinkers saw them as astral influences (giving rise to astrology); by the time of Galileo, scientists understood planets as natural objects moving according to natural laws.
military before, but decided after high school to see if he could make a go of it in the private sector first.

Things went pretty well. The work was steady, the money was good and Sabatino figured his ambitions of working with airplanes could wait awhile.

Then it all slowed down.

He said when things were going well, he’d have five jobs a week installing signs on businesses as well as doing some side jobs with smaller signs. But as businesses constricted, the jobs dried up to about one per week.

It wasn’t enough.

“I had bills,” he said. “They weren’t going away.”

So on Thursday, Sabatino found himself sitting in an overheated U.S. Marine Corps recruiting station in Thornton answering questions about his education and job history and explaining why he wanted to join.

Staff Sgt. Chris Tari dutifully filled out the paperwork, told Sabatino that he’d have to pass some tests and that, if all went according to plan, he could ship out to recruit training as early as August—though September was more likely.

In the meantime, his plan is to learn aviation electronics and eventually cycle back into the private sector and work with planes.

“I’ll probably get out when the going is good again,” he said.

**For love of country**

Sgt. 1st Class Brett Scarcelli is pure U.S. Army. Standing in the recruiting station at Metropolitan State College in Denver, he clutches a tennis ball in one hand and never lowers his gaze when talking to someone. For him, the Army is about service to country. Period.

But that approach doesn’t necessarily work on potential recruits. So, Scarcelli is armed with the things that might matter to college students wandering around the Tivoli Student Union on the Auraria campus. There are increasing tuition costs, budget cuts at state universities, and difficulties in getting hired right now straight out of college, for instance.

The message seems to work.

“I talked to a guy who just got his degree and has six months before he has to start paying. And he can’t find a job,” Scarcelli said. “The Army is willing to pay off the loans, and he can wait four years to see what the economy does.”

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

1. How does the surge in military recruiting reflect not just personal choices by individuals but also larger changes in society?
2. Can you point to other personal choices people are making that may be linked to the weaker economy? What are they?
3. Did the weakening economy affect your life in terms of work? What about your decision to attend college? Explain.


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

By the beginning of the twentieth century, sociology had spread to the United States and showed the influence of Comte’s ideas. Today, most sociologists still consider science a crucial part of sociology. But as Chapter 2 (“Sociological Investigation”) explains, we now realize that human behavior is far more complex than the movement of planets or even the actions of other living things. We are creatures of imagination and spontaneity, so human behavior can never be fully explained by any rigid “laws of society.” In addition, early sociologists such as Karl Marx (1818–1883), whose ideas are discussed in Chapter 4 (“Society”), were troubled by the striking inequalities of industrial society. They hoped that the new discipline of sociology would not just help us understand society but also lead to change toward greater social justice.

**Sociological Theory**

The desire to translate observations into understanding brings us to the important aspect of sociology known as *theory*. A theory is a statement of how and why specific facts are related. The job of sociological theory is to explain social behavior in the real world. For example, recall Emile Durkheim’s theory that categories of people with low social integration (men, Protestants, the wealthy, and the unmarried) are at higher risk of suicide. Seeing Sociology in the News explains one consequence of the recent economic recession.

As the next chapter (“Sociological Investigation”) explains, sociologists test their theories by gathering evidence using various research methods. Durkheim did exactly this, finding out which categories of people were more likely to commit suicide and which were less likely and then devising a theory that best squared with all available evidence. National Map 1–1 on page 14 displays the suicide rate for each of the fifty states.

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

**The Structural-Functional Approach**

The *structural-functional approach* is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. As its name suggests, this approach points to social structure, any relatively stable pattern of
In the Plains and Mountain regions of the country, where population density is very low, people are more isolated and have a higher rate of suicide.

social behavior. Social structure gives our lives shape—in families, the workplace, the classroom, and the community. This approach also looks for a structure’s social functions, the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole. All social structures, from a simple handshake to complex religious rituals, function to keep society going, at least in its present form.

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

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

But Merton also recognized that not all the effects of social structure are good. Thus a social dysfunction is any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society. People often disagree about what is helpful and what is harmful to society as a whole. In addition, what is functional for one category of people (say, high profits for Wall Street bank executives) may well be dysfunctional for other categories of people (workers who lose pension funds invested in banks that fail, people who cannot pay their mortgages and end up losing their homes).

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

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

CHECK YOUR LEARNING How do manifest functions differ from latent functions? Give an example of a manifest function and a latent function of automobiles in the United States.
The Social-Conflict Approach

The social-conflict approach is a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change. Unlike the structural-functional emphasis on solidarity and stability, this approach highlights inequality and change. Guided by this approach, which includes the gender-conflict and race-conflict approaches, sociologists investigate how factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and age are linked to a society’s unequal distribution of money, power, education, and social prestige. A conflict analysis rejects the idea that social structure promotes the operation of society as a whole, focusing instead on how social patterns benefit some people while harming others.

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

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

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

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

Feminism and the Gender-Conflict Approach

One important type of social-conflict analysis is the gender-conflict approach, a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between women and men. The gender-conflict approach is closely linked to feminism, support of social equality for women and men. The importance of the gender-conflict approach lies in making us aware of the many ways in which our way of life places men in positions of power over women: in the home (where men are usually considered “head of the household”), in the workplace (where men earn more income and hold most positions of power), and in the mass media (how many hip-hop stars are women?).

Another contribution of the gender-conflict approach is making us aware of the importance of women to the development of sociology. Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) is regarded as the first woman sociologist. Born to a wealthy English family, Martineau made her mark in 1853 by translating the writings of Auguste Comte from French into English. In her own published writings, she documented the evils of slavery and argued for laws to protect factory workers, defending workers’ right to unionize. She was particularly concerned
The feminist and gender-conflict approaches and the race-conflict approach are all examples of social-conflict theory.

between people of different racial and ethnic categories. Just as men have power over women, white people have numerous social advantages over people of color, including, on average, higher incomes, more schooling, better health, and longer life expectancy.

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

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

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

The Race-Conflict Approach

Another important type of social-conflict analysis is the race-conflict approach, a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict
macro-level orientation a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole

structural-functional approach (p. 13)
social-conflict approach (p. 15)

micro-level orientation a close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations

symbolic-interaction approach a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals

THINKING ABOUT DIVERSITY: RACE, CLASS, & GENDER

One of sociology’s pioneers in the United States, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois saw sociology as the key to solving society’s problems, especially racial inequality.

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

In his sociological classic The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (1899), Du Bois explored Philadelphia’s African American community, identifying both the strengths and the weaknesses of people who were dealing with overwhelming social problems on a day-to-day basis. He challenged the belief—widespread at that time—that blacks were inferior to whites, and he blamed white prejudice for creating the problems that African Americans faced. He also criticized successful people of color for being so eager to win white acceptance that they gave up all ties with the black community, which needed their help.

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

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

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

The Symbolic-Interaction Approach

The structural-functional and social-conflict approaches share a macro-level orientation, a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole. Macro-level sociology takes in the big picture, rather like observing a city from high above in a helicopter and seeing how highways help people move from place to place or how housing differs from rich to poor neighborhoods. Sociology also uses a micro-level orientation, a close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations. Exploring urban life in this way occurs at street level, where you might watch how children invent games on a school playground or how pedestrians respond to homeless people they pass on the street. The symbolic-interaction approach, then, is a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals.

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

The symbolic-interaction approach has roots in the thinking of Max Weber (1864–1920), a German sociologist who emphasized the need to understand a setting from the point of view of the people in it. Weber’s approach is discussed in detail in Chapter 4 (“Society”). Since Weber’s time, sociologists have taken micro-level sociology in a number of directions. Chapter 5 (“Socialization”)
MAKING THE GRADE

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

APPLYING THEORY

### Major Theoretical Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Structural-Functional Approach</th>
<th>Social-Conflict Approach</th>
<th>Symbolic-Interaction Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the level of analysis?</strong></td>
<td>Macro-level</td>
<td>Macro-level</td>
<td>Micro-level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What image of society does the approach have?</strong></td>
<td>Society is a system of interrelated parts that is relatively stable. Each part works to keep society operating in an orderly way. Members generally agree about what is morally right and morally wrong.</td>
<td>Society is a system of social inequalities based on class (Marx), gender (feminism and gender-conflict approach), and race (race-conflict approach). Society operates to benefit some categories of people and harm others. Social inequality causes conflict that leads to social change.</td>
<td>Society is an ongoing process. People interact in countless settings using symbolic communications. The reality people experience is variable and changing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What core questions does the approach ask?</strong></td>
<td>How is society held together? What are the major parts of society? How are these parts linked? What does each part do to help society work?</td>
<td>How does society divide a population? How do advantaged people protect their privileges? How do disadvantaged people challenge the system seeking change?</td>
<td>How do people experience society? How do people shape the reality they experience? How do behavior and meaning change from person to person and from one situation to another?</td>
</tr>
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discusses the ideas of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who explored how our personalities develop as a result of social experience. Chapter 6 (“Social Interaction in Everyday Life”) presents the work of Erving Goffman (1922–1982), whose dramaturgical analysis describes how we resemble actors on a stage as we play our various roles. Other contemporary sociologists, including George Homans and Peter Blau, have developed social-exchange analysis. In their view, social interaction is guided by what each person stands to gain or lose from the interaction. In the ritual of courtship, for example, people seek mates who offer at least as much—in terms of physical attractiveness, intelligence, and wealth—as they offer in return.

CRITICAL REVIEW Without denying the existence of macro-level social structures such as the family and social class, the symbolic-interaction approach reminds us that society basically amounts to people interacting. That is, micro-level sociology tries to show how individuals actually experience society.

But on the other side of the coin, by focusing on what is unique in each social scene, this approach risks overlooking the widespread influence of culture, as well as factors such as class, gender, and race.

CHECK YOUR LEARNING How does a micro-level analysis differ from a macro-level analysis? Provide an illustration of a micro-level social pattern and another of a social pattern that operates at a macro level.

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

Who among us doesn’t enjoy sports? Children as young as six or seven take part in organized sports, and many teens become skilled at three or more. Weekend television is filled with sporting events for viewers of all ages, and whole sections of our newspapers are devoted to teams, players, and scores. In the United States, top players such as Mark McGwire (baseball), Tiger Woods (golf), and Serena Williams (tennis) are among our most famous celebrities. Sports in the United States are also a multibillion-dollar industry. What can we learn by applying sociology’s three theoretical approaches to this familiar part of everyday life?

The Functions of Sports

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

Sports also have dysfunctional consequences. For example, colleges and universities that try to field winning teams sometimes recruit students for their athletic skill rather than their academic ability. This practice not only lowers the academic standards of a school but also shortchanges athletes, who spend little time doing the academic work that will prepare them for later careers (Upthegrove, Roscigno, & Charles, 1999).

Sports and Conflict

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

Throughout history, sports have been oriented mostly toward males. For example, the first modern Olympic Games, held in 1896, barred women from competition; in the United States, Little League teams in most parts of the country have only recently let girls play. Traditional ideas that girls and women lack the strength to play sports have now been widely rejected. But our society still encourages men to become athletes while expecting women to be attentive observers and cheerleaders. At the college level, men’s athletics attracts a greater amount of attention and resources compared to women’s athletics, and men greatly outnumber women as coaches, even in women’s sports (Welch & Sigelman, 2007). At the professional level, women also take a back seat to men, particularly in the sports with the most earnings and social prestige.

For decades, big league sports excluded people of color, who were forced to form leagues of their own. Only in 1947 did Major League Baseball admit the first African American player when Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. More than fifty years later, professional baseball honored Robinson’s amazing career by retiring his number 42 on all of the teams in the league. In 2007, African Americans (13 percent of the U.S. population) accounted for 8 percent of Major League Baseball players, 66 percent of National Football League (NFL) players, and 76 percent of National Basketball Association (NBA) players (Lapchick, 2008).

One reason for the high number of African Americans in many professional sports is that athletic performance—in terms of batting average or number of points scored per game—can be precisely measured and is not influenced by racial prejudice. It is also...
76% of quarterbacks but only 2% of cornerbacks are white.

Diversity Snapshot

FIGURE 1–2 “Stacking” in Professional Football

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


true that some people of color make a particular effort to excel in athletics, where they see greater opportunity than in other careers (S. Steele, 1990; Edwards, 2000; Harrison, 2000). In recent years, in fact, African American athletes have earned higher salaries, on average, than white players.

But racial discrimination still exists in professional sports. For one thing, race is linked to the positions athletes play on the field, in a pattern called “stacking.” Figure 1–2 shows the results of a study of race in football. Notice that white athletes are much more likely than African American athletes to play offense and to take the central positions on both sides of the line. More broadly, African Americans have a large share of players in only five sports: baseball, basketball, football, boxing, and track. In all professional sports, the vast majority of managers, head coaches, and owners of sports teams are white (Lapchick, 2008).

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

Sports as Interaction

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

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

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

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

The Controversy & Debate box discusses the use of the sociological perspective and reviews many of the ideas presented in this chapter. This box raises a number of questions that will help you understand how sociological generalizations differ from the common stereotypes we encounter every day.
Is Sociology Nothing More than Stereotypes?

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

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

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

Marcia: (becoming fairly interested) Like what?

Jena: Professor Chandler said today in class that if you’re a Protestant, you’re likely to kill yourself. And then Yannina—this girl from, I think, Ecuador—says something like, “You Americans are rich, you marry, and you love to divorce!”

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

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

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

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

Jena remembered her professor saying (although not in quite the same words) that the suicide rate among Protestants is higher than among Catholics or Jews. Based on information presented earlier in this chapter, that is a true statement. However, the way Jena incorrectly reported the classroom remark—“If you’re a Protestant, you’re likely to kill yourself”—is not good sociology. It is not a true generalization because the vast majority of Protestants do no such thing. It would be just as wrong to jump to the conclusion that a particular friend, because he is a Protestant male, is about to end his own life. (Imagine refusing to lend money to a roommate who happens to be a Baptist, explaining, “Well, given the way people like you commit suicide, I might never get paid back!”)

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

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

The bottom line is that good sociological generalizations are not the same as harmful stereotyping. A college sociology course is an excellent setting for getting at the truth behind common stereotypes. The classroom encourages discussion and offers the factual information you need to decide whether a particular statement is a valid sociological generalization or just a stereotype.

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

We asked this question at the beginning of this chapter. The commonsense answer is that people marry because they are in love. But as this chapter has explained, society guides our everyday lives, affecting what we do, think, and feel. Look at the three photographs, each showing a couple who, we can assume, is “in love.” In each case, can you provide some of the rest of the story? By looking at the categories that the people involved represent, explain how society is at work in bringing the two people together.

**HINT** Society is at work on many levels. Consider (1) rules about same-sex and other-sex marriage, (2) laws defining the number of people who may marry, (3) the importance of race and ethnicity, (4) the importance of social class, (5) the importance of age, and (6) the importance of social exchange (what each partner offers the other). All societies enforce various rules that state who should or should not marry whom.

Jada Pinkett met Will Smith in 1995 when she auditioned for a part on his hit show, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.* Two years later, they married. What social patterns do you see?
1. Analyze the marriages of your parents, other family members, and friends in terms of class, race, age, and other factors. What evidence can you find that society guides the feeling we call “love”?

2. Figure 18–2 on page 476 shows the U.S. divorce rate over the past century. Using the sociological perspective, and with an eye to the timeline inside the back cover of this book, try to identify societal factors that caused the divorce rate to rise or fall.

3. Explore your local area, and draw a sociological map of the community. Include the types of buildings (for example, “big, single-family homes,” “rundown business district,” “new office buildings,” “student apartments”) found in various places, and guess at the categories of people who live or work there. What patterns do you see?

In 1997, during the fourth season of her hit TV show, Ellen, Ellen DeGeneres “came out” as a lesbian, which put her on the cover of Time magazine. Since then, she has been an activist on behalf of gay and lesbian issues. Following California’s brief legalization of same-sex marriage in 2008, she married her longtime girlfriend, Australian actress Portia de Rossi.

In 2000, at the age of fifty-six, Michael Douglas ended a twenty-three-year marriage in order to marry actress Catherine Zeta-Jones, who was then thirty-one. How likely is it that a fifty-six-year-old woman would marry a thirty-one-year-old man?
MAKING THE GRADE

CHAPTER 1 The Sociological Perspective

What Is the Sociological Perspective?

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

**Positivism** (p. 13) is a way of understanding based on science.

**Sociology** (p. 2) is the systematic study of human society.

**Global perspective** (p. 6) is the study of the larger world and our society’s place in it.

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

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

**Low-income countries** (p. 7) are nations with a low standard of living in which most people are poor.

### The Importance of a Global Perspective

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Applying the Sociological Perspective

Societies throughout the world are increasingly interconnected.

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

### Origins of Sociology

**Rapid social change** in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made people more aware of their surroundings and helped trigger the development of sociology:

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

**Auguste Comte** named sociology in 1838 to describe a new way of looking at society.

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

The countries that experienced the most rapid social change were those in which sociology developed first (p. 11).
Sociological Theory

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

**Theoretical approach** (p. 13) a basic image of society that guides thinking and research

**Structural-functional approach** (p. 13) a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability

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

**Gender-conflict approach** (p. 15) a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between women and men

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

**Feminism** (p. 15) support of social equality for women and men

**Social dysfunction** (p. 14) any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society

**Manifest functions** (p. 14) the recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern

**Latent functions** (p. 14) the unrecognized and unintended consequences of any social pattern

**Social structure** (p. 13) any relatively stable pattern of social behavior

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

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

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

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

### The Structural-Functional Approach

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

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

**Macro-level**

- **Social structure** (p. 13) any relatively stable pattern of social behavior
- **Social functions** (p. 14) the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole
- **Manifest functions** (p. 14) the recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern
- **Latent functions** (p. 14) the unrecognized and unintended consequences of any social pattern
- **Social dysfunction** (p. 14) any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society
- **Gender-conflict approach** (p. 15) a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between women and men
- **Race-conflict approach** (p. 16) a point of view that focuses on inequality and conflict between people of different racial and ethnic categories
- **Feminism** (p. 15) support of social equality for women and men

### The Social-Conflict Approach

The **social-conflict approach** shows how inequality creates conflict and causes change.

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

**Micro-level**

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

### The Symbolic-Interaction Approach

The **symbolic-interaction approach** studies how people, in everyday interaction, construct reality.

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

### Applying the Approaches: The Sociology of Sports

**The Functions of Sports**

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

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

**Sports and Conflict**

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

- Historically, sports have benefited men more than women.
- Some sports are accessible mainly to affluent people.
- Racial discrimination exists in professional sports.

**Sports as Interaction**

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

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

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

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

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**Note:** For a more detailed and comprehensive understanding, refer to the full text for accurate and complete information. The above summary is a condensed version for easy reading.