I know people who drink, people who do drugs, and bosses who have tantrums and treat their subordinates like dirt. They all have good jobs. Were they to become homeless, some of them would surely also become “alcoholics,” “addicts,” or “mentally ill.” Similarly, if some of the homeless women who are now so labeled were to be magically transported to a more usual and acceptable setting, some of them—not all, of course—would shed their labels and take their places with the rest of us somewhere on the spectrum of normality.

“There are many homeless people in America and that is a shame. Shame on you, shame on me, shame on America. Shame because it is the result of choices we have made, shame because it does not have to be. . . . Homeless people are homeless because they do not have a place to live.

“The connection between homelessness and poverty points to major system failures at the lower and sometimes middle level of our wage-labor hierarchy. The major failure is the inability of the system, even in the best of times, to provide jobs for all who are able and willing to work. Every day, millions of would-be workers are told that our society has nothing for them to do, that they are not needed, that they and their dependents are surplus.

“Another major system failure, equally destructive, is the fact that a growing number of men and women—individuals and heads of families—are workers but remain poor. . . . These workers file papers, mop floors, clean the tables, or guard whatever needs guarding. At the end of the day, they say “OK, I’ve done what you asked me to do. What am I worth?” And our society answers, through the employer, “Not much. Not even enough to live on.”
The homeless are often viewed as nameless, faceless, voiceless people loitering on street corners and huddled under bridges. It’s easy for us to turn a blind eye to the problem if we don’t feel a personal connection to the man panhandling on the sidewalk or the woman seeking warmth beneath a flimsy cardboard box.

In Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women, professor and sociologist Elliot Liebow gives a voice to the homeless women he encounters. The homeless are no longer anonymous people on the street corner; they now have names and faces. Nobody chooses to be homeless, Liebow writes, but sometimes circumstances turn against him or her. Homelessness can happen anywhere, even on a college campus, as I found out one semester: I learned that one of my students often stayed in the library until closing time. She didn’t have a place to live, so she read in the library until closing and then walked to a local store to sleep in the clothing aisles. She was pregnant, and her parents had kicked her out of the house. Of course, none of this was planned; it simply happened. And I was left, like Liebow, to wonder why a country as developed as the United States has allowed homelessness to become a “normal” part of its culture.

Liebow’s book is a blueprint of what sociology is all about. He gathers information, explains his findings, and then thinks about the bigger picture. He questions social policies and draws his own conclusions. A sociologist like Liebow does not try to pinpoint one specific cause of homelessness in the United States. Instead, he tackles the issue from all angles.

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get the topic: **WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?**

### Sociology Defined

How do you define sociology? You might say that it’s the study of society, the study of how people live, or the study of people’s interactions with one another. This is all true, but these answers only scratch the surface. According to the American Sociological Association, **sociology** is a science guided by the basic understanding that “the social matters: our lives are affected, not only by our individual characteristics but by our place in the social world.” Like any science, sociologists seek to understand the facts of a situation while keeping an open mind about what they are studying. In addition to this, we strive to keep our personal opinions at bay.

### MAKE CONNECTIONS

#### Using Video Games to Study Sociology

Have you ever wanted to control someone else’s actions? Leave it to video games to allow you to act out such a fantasy. One of the most popular is The Sims, a strategic computer game that simulates real life. You decide when your character sleeps, eats, and even bathes. More recently, the game Façade has sprung forth a similar idea. While The Sims and Façade play up the entertainment factor, they also provide a lesson in sociology.

Players of The Sims and Façade manipulate characters in a virtual world to see the effects certain behaviors have on the characters’ lives. Your characters become depressed when they have little interaction with others, just like in real life.

The Sims and Façade allow you to study the effect people’s actions have on themselves and others. The best part is that in the simulated world, the consequences are not real, so you don’t have to be afraid to test how extreme behaviors affect your characters.

>>> **ACTIVITY** Think about a real-world theory you’d like to use The Sims or Façade to test. How would you use the game to test the theory? What do you think the outcome of your study will be? Write a few paragraphs describing your proposed sociological study. If you have access to either of these video games, go ahead and test your theory!

#### Developing a Sociological Imagination

One of my students recently lost her job at a nearby automotive factory. She attended classes during the day and worked at a convenience store at night. Being a single mother of two, she had no one to watch her kids while she was at work. Without supervision, her children were falling behind in school, hanging out on street corners, and getting into trouble. Like many single parents, she had no other options and no idea what else to do.

When we think of kids in trouble, many of us probably blame the parents. But, in this situation, does the blame rest solely on her shoulders? Famous American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) would say no. Mills asserted that people must understand how outside forces contribute and is studied using one of three theoretical paradigms

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**Individual Choice vs. Social Forces**
- Solidarity—the level of connectedness a person feels to others in the environment
- Social Control—the social mechanisms that regulate a person’s actions

**Functionalism**
- views society as a system of interrelated parts
- is a macro orientation because it studies how social structures affect how a society works

**Conflict Theory**
- studies issues such as race, gender, social class, criminal justice, and international relations
- is a macro orientation because it studies how the struggle for resources holds society together
to someone’s situation. In other words, Mills wanted us to develop a **sociological imagination** — the ability to look beyond the individual as the cause for success and failure and see how one’s society influences the outcome.  

Developing a sociological imagination helps you understand your place in a complex world. We must grasp both the history and the biography of a situation to generate this imagination. Mills argued that most of us see social issues through biography; that is, our personal point of view. This **micro**, or small-scale, reference focuses our attention on the individual. We must also understand how history and social structure affect the individual. By including this **macro**, or large-scale, point of view in our imagining of the social world, we can understand it more clearly. These factors influence both our individual choices and our interpretation of events. So, using the sociological imagination gives us more than an individualistic interpretation of the world.  

Let’s consider my student’s situation this time using our sociological imaginations. Is outsourcing labor to blame for her situation? When U.S. companies close because of cheaper overseas labor, workers in the United States suffer. Ultimately, the goal of most businesses is to make the biggest profit possible, so owners can’t resist the lure of hiring cheap labor. With gas and food prices skyrocketing, many businesses must adjust their budgets accordingly and find less expensive ways of doing things. Some people win and others lose, as in my student’s case. If my student had not lost her job, would her children still be in trouble? Probably not. She reported that when working her old job, she was home every day when they got home from school. Now, she rarely sees them. What’s clear is that when thinking sociologically about an issue, simple answers rarely explain the complexities of human situations.

**When working-class parents struggle to put food on the table, some might blame their predicament on a lack of education or motivation.** People using a sociological imagination, however, might attribute other forces, such as rising gas prices, to the parents’ predicament.
Emile Durkheim’s Theory on Suicide

There are often several biographical, social, and historical causes for every event—from homelessness to unemployment to suicide. Using a sociological imagination means that we consider the impact on the individual from these points of view. Ever wonder why someone would commit suicide? Suicide is perhaps the most personal type of death, and yet in the 1897 book Suicide, sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) proposed that two social forces, solidarity and social control, influence the chance of a person taking his or her own life.\(^6\) **Solidarity** refers to the level of connectedness a person feels to others in the environment, and **social control** refers to the social mechanisms that regulate a person’s actions.\(^7\) These two social forces are independent factors that help predict the type of suicide someone might commit.

When people lack solidarity, **egoistic suicides** occur. People who commit these suicides have few social connections, feel isolated and alone, and are more likely to fall into despair. Of course, this doesn’t mean that all “loners” are suicidal. It only shows that having low levels of solidarity increases the odds for egoistic suicides.

Solidarity levels also influence the likelihood of **altruistic suicides**. These suicides result when the level of solidarity is exceptionally high. Because the individual is deeply connected to a group, he or she views the best interests of the group as superior to all other interests. This particular analysis might explain the rationale behind kamikaze pilots and suicide bombers.

Durkheim identified four different types of suicide—egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic, and anomic—illustrated in the graphic below.\(^8\)
Chapter 1

TANT WAY TO CONSIDER THE TENSION BETWEEN SOCIAL FORCES AND INDIVIDUAL CHOICE.

Individual Choice and Social Forces

You’ve probably guessed by now that social factors often influence our personal choices. They provide a context in which we make decisions. Again, consider the act of suicide. Most of my students suggest that this is totally an individual choice, and in fact it is. However, certain trends arise in the data on suicides that indicate people who are at higher risk of taking their own lives.

Time of year, profession, and age all predict the likelihood of suicide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- Suicide rates in the United States are lowest in winter and highest in spring. During the winter holidays, most people are surrounded by friends and family. However, in the spring this socialization may end. The lack of integration might increase the odds of an egoistic suicide.
- Police officers have a high risk of suicide. Perhaps this is because they work long hours and are exposed to violent and graphic scenes. Add to this fact that they have easy access to guns, and you can see some structural characteristics that may lead them to fatalistic thinking and suicide.
- Generally, the rate of suicide increases with age. Furthermore, men are more likely to commit suicide than women. Men over the age of 65 have the highest rates of suicide in the United States. This may also be due to fatalism, because when people age, they may have more illnesses and/or physical limitations that increase the risk of suicide. 11

It is important for you to note that these factors do not cause individuals to commit suicide per se; however, they do indicate groups who are at a higher risk of killing themselves. When sociologists examine an issue, such as suicide, homelessness, or any other social event, they use their sociological imagination to help consider how social factors influence an individual’s choice. How do sociologists use the sociological imagination to study the larger world? Let’s examine three important theoretical perspectives and the sociologists who helped develop them.

Think Sociologically

Homelessness—Individual Choice vs. Social Factors

Have you ever heard someone argue that people choose to be homeless? You might have even made the argument yourself. In Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women, Liebow says, “it is, perhaps, all too easy to fall into homelessness, but being there is not easy at all.” When many people are living paycheck to paycheck, it’s not hard to imagine someone waking up one day and finding that they don’t have enough money to pay a mortgage or buy groceries.

Liebow finds that most homeless women are actually working-class women who have fallen on hard times. Once these women “fall into homelessness,” they find it tough to climb out of that dark hole. Finding work is especially difficult because employers shy away from hiring people who have no home. Even if a homeless woman actually finds a job, many times her wages will not be enough to pay for a house, especially when she must spend a good part of her salary on transportation to get to work. The rest of her money is likely to be spent on food for her family and other necessities. As a result, her children grow up in an environment with little privacy and few role models for success.

Although Liebow does not suggest that homelessness is impossible to overcome, he does argue that society is doing little to help. With the cards seemingly stacked against homeless people, what choice do they really have?

>>> ACTIVITY Visit a homeless shelter in your community. Talk to the people there and find out how social factors contributed to their situations. How did they arrive at the shelter? What were their lives like before? Write a paragraph describing one of the people you met, analyzing the factors that led to that person’s homelessness.
think sociologically: WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THREE MAJOR SOCIOLOGICAL PARADIGMS?

Before I ever knew anything about sociology, I had a worldview. Being born in the United States to a religious, working-class family, my parents’ teachings shaped my point of view. Had I been born in China, Chad, or Chile, I would likely think differently about the world. How do you view the world? What personal beliefs or ideas do you value most? It might be difficult to respond to these questions, but I bet you have some pretty definitive answers. When sociologists take in the world, they do it through a paradigm—a theoretical framework through which scientists study the world.

In the United States, most sociologists view the world through three major paradigms—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Functionalism is a theoretical framework that defines society as a system of interrelated parts. This paradigm is a macro approach to sociological study because it focuses on larger social structures rather than individuals. When you think about functionalism, it may be helpful to think about the human body. The body has built-in mechanisms that help it maintain a normal body temperature. This is your body’s way of trying to maintain its optimal functioning. If you are stranded outside in freezing temperatures, you will start shivering in an attempt to regulate your body temperature. Society is similar in many ways. When something happens to throw a social system off-kilter, certain forces step in to help balance things out again.

Conflict theory is a theoretical framework that views society as being in a constant struggle over scarce resources. This constant struggle inevitably results in an unequal system. Similar to functionalism, conflict theory is also a macro approach, as this theory is concerned with various interested groups battling for power. Inequality of wealth and power in society is often the focus of modern conflict theory. For example, conflict theorists might examine how the chasm between the rich and the poor affects people’s opportunities in our society. It’s no surprise that children who come from privileged backgrounds can afford to receive the best educations, participate in organized sports, and take music lessons. However, children from poorer families may not get these same opportunities, and this lack of opportunity puts them at a disadvantage.

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework that focuses on how individual interactions between people influence them and how these interactions can impact society. Symbolic interactionism is primarily a micro approach to sociology because it is concerned with the individual’s role in creating society. The use of “symbols,” such as words, gestures, body language, and facial expressions, influence how people communicate. Our actions communicate meaning. For example, if you’re having a “bad day,” what does that mean? One student once told me he had a “bad day” every time it rained. If that is the case, could such a definition of reality influence how you behave toward others on your job or in the classroom? How might his “bad day” influence the “days” of others? Interactionists constantly seek to understand how small interactions influence the larger society.

In 2010, home foreclosures became a “sign of the times.” The stress of tough economic times can push some people, who probably would not have ever thought of suicide, to take that step. Can you see Durkheim’s point about anomie suicide in such cases?
As you can see, sociologists often approach their study of society from either a macro or micro perspective. In sociology, the macro approach is most commonly used, as it examines larger social groups and institutions and their effects on society. This is part of what separates sociology from psychology, as psychology operates on a micro level by studying the workings of the human mind. Although some sociological studies focus on the individual, the primary concern is the effect that these individuals have on the rest of society and the influence that society has on the individual. Each sociological paradigm can combine aspects of macro and micro approaches, and yet they all seek to understand the process by which people influence society and society affects them.

Sociologists from each paradigm often analyze similar issues, such as why homelessness exists or how children learn about the social world. However, the questions they ask as they analyze these issues differ. The chart below illustrates how functionalists, conflict theorists, and symbolic interactionists approach learning about society.

Sociologists use these questions to help them build theories about the world. So, is one school of thought better than the others? Not necessarily. In fact, the worldviews of most sociologists are rather eclectic or diverse. They may use each paradigm to illuminate different issues or use all three to look comprehensively at a single issue. If you consider Liebow's work, for example, you'll see that he uses bits and pieces of each paradigm to understand homelessness. Liebow finds that a society's structures create homelessness (functionalism), and people with wealth and power control those structures and are generally abusive to the poorest of the poor (conflict theory). Those who experience homelessness often create self-fulfilling prophecies that help them remain mired in their plight (symbolic interactionism). Liebow uses each of these ideas to create a complete view of why homelessness exists in our society.

Emerging Paradigms

New sociology students may think that these are the only three paradigms in sociology. Although these are the core paradigms in sociology and essential for you to understand, social thinkers have gone beyond these three. Let's look at a few emerging paradigms often used in sociology. We'll revisit some of these in chapters where they best apply.

**Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory is a gendered and interdisciplinary approach that seeks to answer how the social world is ordered around gender. In short, how do women fit into a social world that has been traditionally controlled by men? Feminists often ask, “Why is the social world the way that it is?” and “Can the social world be changed to make it a place for all people?” How do race, ethnicity, social class, and age all interact with gender to determine the outcomes for individuals?

Feminist theories can fall into one of three types. Gender inequality theories focus on how women’s experiences of the social world are different from those of men. Often, this focuses on sexist patterns that limit women’s opportunities for work, education, and other social needs. Gender oppression theories suggest that men oppress women by keeping and maintaining power over them through purposeful discrimination. Structural oppression theories suggest that women’s oppression is rooted in capitalism and patriarchies that keep women on the margins of the social world. The oppressive nature of the social world is rooted in the structures of patriarchy and capitalism, which ultimately leads to the oppression of women.

**Exchange Theory**

Exchange theorists suggest our social experiences consist of a series of rewards and costs. People inherently seek to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs, thus leading to their choice of social action. Often,
Moths with colors that stand out in their environment are beautiful, but such colors may not function well as a survival mode. Similarly, societies that cannot adapt may not survive.

exchange theory appeals to thinkers on a micro level, such as why you may select the particular mate you choose. If a girl is dating a boy but becomes exasperated with his manners when they are dining out, she may choose to break up with him because she perceives the costs of staying in the relationship as higher than the rewards. Of course, exchange theory also has a macro point of view. Is it really in the best interests of any country to export all of their manufacturing jobs simply because the countries to which they send those jobs can provide cheaper labor? In calculating the value of the exchange, one must consider not only the short-term rewards (immediate profits), but also the potential long-term consequences (economic collapse when transportation of goods gets interrupted).

ENVIRONMENTAL THEORY
This is perhaps the most recent emerging paradigm. This perspective seeks to blend social thought and ecological principles to discover how environmental attitudes have changed, as well as how environmental policies and justice influence society. Environmental social thinkers often seek to understand how societies adjust to ecological changes. How many people can actually live in a specific area? This idea is known as the carrying capacity of an area. Often, we believe that human beings are an exception to the ecological limits of carrying capacity. Environmental theory suggests this is not necessarily true. For environmental sociology, human beings are merely one more type of organism sharing the ecological space with animals. Dealing with the reality of limits becomes an important component of the social world. How do societies adapt, and if they fail to adapt, will they continue to survive? These questions and more are at the core of environmental social thought.

The Functionalist’s Worldview
Although philosophers have always tackled the issues surrounding how people and society fit together, it was not until French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the term sociology that the discipline got its name.1 The oldest sociological paradigm, functionalism owes much to Comte, who is considered the father of sociology.

Comte felt that sociology should strive to discover social laws—statements of fact that are unchanging under given conditions and can be used as ground rules for any study of society. In order to discover these laws, Comte proposed that we study social statics, or the existing structural elements of society, and social dynamics, or the change in those elements. He believed that by discovering the interplay between structures and dynamics we could develop social laws that would help improve society. To date, we have no social laws, but some sociologists are still trying to develop them. Although few people follow Comte’s theories today, his basic ideas are the groundwork on which functionalism is based.

As we’ve discussed, functionalism is a theoretical framework that defines society as a system of interrelated parts. These parts work in concert with one another to satisfy the needs of society as a whole. According to functionalists, society is relatively stable, which means that things occur in society for a specific function and those functions help maintain stability.

Social institutions such as the family, economy, educational system, and political system are critical for society to function properly. Understanding how these and other social institutions work in a society is of great interest to functionalists. Since these parts are interrelated, each has an impact on the others. Remember my student who lost her job? The economic system influenced the family system, which may, if her children continue to get into trouble, interact with the criminal justice system.

Performing functional analysis can be layered and quite complex. Functionalism suggests that a society’s values and norms provide the foundation for the rules and laws that it creates. These norms regulate the relationships between social institutions. Therefore, general agreement on these norms must occur for a society to achieve balance.

All of the social structures, from the minor day-to-day interactions with friends to the complex cultural traditions and customs, work together to keep society running. Functionalists, however, have differing views about how these structures cooperate with one another. Some compare society to a living, breathing organism; others analyze the expected and unexpected outcomes of a social event, while still others wonder what exactly it is that holds a society together. Although it’s the oldest theoretical approach, functionalism remains an important way to consider society. On the next few pages, we’ll investigate some early functionalists and you can see who these ideas come from. Early theorists like Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim contributed to the growth and development of the functionalist perspective.

HERBERT SPENCER
Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was a British intellectual whose ideas furthered the development of functionalism. Spencer’s study of sociology
was informed by Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Darwin argued that natural selection—a process resulting in the evolution of organisms best adapted to the environment—makes evolution occur. Spencer viewed society as a biological organism, and as such, it can evolve, thrive, or die. For him, some societies are “more fit” than others because they adapt better to changes in the environment. From Spencer, you can see a type of thinking often called “social Darwinism”—a notion that suggests strong societies survive and weak ones become extinct.\(^4\)

Spencer’s idea informs a social theory that, in essence, evaluates the superiority or inferiority of a society based on its ability to be strong and survive. For example, in a recent class discussion about homelessness, one of my students stated, “Homeless people can’t follow the rules that everyone else does; their homelessness is their own fault.” Do you see Spencer’s ideas in her comments? How do her words reflect the idea of social Darwinism? On the macro level, do you think some societies are superior to others? Would you suggest that the United States reached its success due to its own merit? If so, you think a bit like a social Darwinist.

**EMILE DURKHEIM**

Like Spencer, French intellectual Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) also viewed society as an organism. You should recognize Durkheim’s name from our discussion of suicide earlier in the chapter. Durkheim was one of the first true sociologists, in that he used data to test theories. His work provides the basis for much of functionalist thought.

Durkheim’s work suggested that solidarity is a vital component that holds society together. Solidarity integrates, or holds society together, because people see themselves as unified. He points out that the type of society influences the type of solidarity. Durkheim divided solidarity into two different types, mechanical and organic. **Mechanical solidarity** refers to the state of community bonding in traditional societies in which people share beliefs and values and perform common activities. It’s this bond that works to keep society running smoothly.\(^5\)

As societies become more complex, their type of solidarity changes from mechanical to organic. **Organic solidarity** occurs when people live in a society with a diverse division of labor. Division of labor refers to the many different jobs we have today. This forces people to depend on one another for survival. Ask yourself, when was the last time you ate something you either grew or killed yourself? For most of us, the answer is never. Food is essential for survival, and yet most of us require a complex division of labor to feed ourselves. Truckers, grocers, and farmers all must do their parts so we can eat.\(^6\) This organic connection ensures that we get the things we need and holds society together. Beliefs remain important in a modern society, but what binds people together is their organic solidarity.\(^7\)

Durkheim’s ideas about solidarity are just the tip of the iceberg, though. A number of American thinkers drew inspiration from Durkheim and expanded his ideas into what is known as functionalist thought.

**Functionalism in the United States**

After Albion Small created the first department of sociology in 1892 at the University of Chicago, a new academic discipline began to emerge across the United States.\(^8\) This budding science provided social thinkers a place to study the workings of society. One of these thinkers was Talcott Parsons.

**TALCOTT PARSONS**

Functionalist Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) was a giant in the field of sociology in the United States. Parsons was interested in creating grand theories that attempted to explain every aspect of the human experience and how social systems interconnect. For Parsons, society was much like a bicycle wheel, made up of independent yet interdependent parts. When properly balanced, each independent spoke connected to the hub keeps the wheel spinning. But if just one spoke breaks on your wheel, the entire wheel will eventually fall out of balance. Similarly, society is an interrelated system, and if one part fails to work, the whole system suffers.\(^9\)

Parsons also commented on the inertia of social systems, meaning that they tend to remain at rest, if they are at rest, or stay in motion, if already in motion. For example, when you go bowling, you must take a bowling ball and use your own force to make it roll down the alley. Once the ball starts rolling, it tends to keep rolling until the pins and the end of the alley stop it. Although the friction from the floor may slow it down, some other force must stop it. Parsons pointed out that the social world acts the same way. Thus, in order to change a society, some great force must impact the system or it will remain unchanged. This is because societies naturally will find a balance. Thus change is unlikely and often disruptive. Of course, once the process of change starts, the

<<< Amish farm communities in Pennsylvania have mechanical solidarity because everyone lives in much the same way, does the same things, and shares the same values.
Robert Merton sought to create a middle-range theory that could bridge the gap between grand theories and the study of individual parts of society. He did this by breaking society into parts and studying them individually to better understand the whole. This idea is widely accepted in sociology today, as most sociologists have an area of expertise, be it race, gender, crime, inequality, population, or a host of other issues. It is possible to spend a career pursuing knowledge in one of these areas, seeking to create theories of the middle range that describe these issues and how they influence society. Merton’s work also shows how sociologists are rarely “pure” theorists in any area.

One of Merton’s greatest theoretical contributions to functionalism was his understanding that social realities have both intended and unintended functions—social factors that affect people in a society. Merton identified two types: manifest functions, or factors that lead to an expected consequence or outcome, and latent functions, or factors that lead to an unforeseen or unexpected consequence. Merton suggested that when looking at any social event, sociologists should ask the question, “For whom is this functional?” By doing this, we’ll do a complete analysis because we’ll consider both manifest and latent functions. For example, one could argue that the manifest function of outsourcing jobs is to improve a company’s profits while providing cheaper goods to consumers. However, the latent function of such a system creates tension for families whose jobs are lost, and who then might lose their homes. For Merton, one cannot complete a functional analysis without considering both manifest and latent functions.

The Functionalist—At a Glance

Auguste Comte

Herbert Spencer

Emile Durkheim

Social Darwinism is a notion that suggests strong societies survive and weak ones become extinct.

Mechanical solidarity refers to the state of community bonding in traditional societies in which people share beliefs and values and perform common activities.

Organic solidarity occurs when people live in a society with a diverse division of labor.

Functions are social factors that affect people in a society.

Manifest functions are functions that lead to an expected consequence or outcome.

Latent functions are functions that lead to unforeseen or unexpected consequences.

Criticisms of Functionalism

In the mid-20th century, functionalism was the dominant theoretical approach. However, its dominance has waned in more recent years. Critics of functionalism sometimes claim that this paradigm does not take into account the influences of wealth and power on the formation of society. From a purely functionalist point of view, all social structures exist because they meet some need. For example, years ago in the town in which I live, downtown area stores had hitching posts in front of them. Now they’re gone because no one rides a horse for transportation anymore. If and when cars become obsolete, society will find some other way to deal with transportation issues. However, in the meantime, cars serve an essential function for society.
either case, conflict theory suggests that we’re all struggling for more “stuff,” whether that “stuff” is power in a marriage or wealth in the world.

Conflict theorists, like functional ones, tend to focus on macro issues, viewing how society’s structures contribute to the conflict. Modern conflict theorists often look at the inequality of a capitalist economic system. Such a system breeds inequality, as it rewards some at the expense of others. Once you have power, you want to keep it. For this reason, the wealthy elites are more likely to create advantages for themselves, even if their actions put others at a disadvantage.

In general, the essence of conflict theory suggests that a pyramid structure of power and wealth exists in society. The elite at the top of the pyramid determine the rules for those below them. Under such a system, laws, institutions, and traditions support their authority. When Liebow discusses the lack of adequate wages and the shame we all deserve because we permit homelessness to exist, he is in essence suggesting that those of us who are not homeless are, in part, responsible for those who are because we allow the system to ignore these people.

Many theorists who use the conflict paradigm might examine macro conflicts between different groups of society, different countries, or different social classes. The study of inequality in sociology always involves a consideration of conflict theory. Therefore, the paradigm applies to social class, race, gender, marriage, religion, population, environment, and a host of other social phenomena. If you believe that discrimination, ageism, sexism, racism, and classism occur in society because some people have the power to promote their desires over others’, then you think like a conflict theorist.

Modern feminist theory, or the study of how gender affects the experiences and opportunities of men and women, often takes a conflict-oriented point of view. Women throughout the world are often still subordinate to men. In some countries, this might mean women cannot choose their own husbands or procure jobs of their choosing, while in this country it can be illustrated by opportunities afforded to women. You’d be hard-pressed to find women CEOs in the biggest companies. Of the top 500 companies in the United States, women lead fewer than 15. Feminists often suggest this occurs because men want to maintain their positions of power in society and strive to keep women out. Do you see the conflict perspective here?

A student once pointed out that women often find themselves at the short end of the “financial stick” and powerful people take advantage of the poor. When I labeled her views as Marxist, she immediately took offense and denied my claim. However, it was evident to me that her views originated from the thoughts of Karl Marx, a founder of conflict theory.

KARL MARX

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German theorist, social activist, and writer who analyzed the effects of capitalism—an economic system in which private individuals own businesses and control the economy. Believing that capitalism corrupted human nature, Marx hoped for a utopia in which equality reigned. At his core, Marx was not that different from Comte because he wished to understand society to improve it for all.

Marx suggested that in a capitalist system, the bourgeoisie, or members of the capitalist class, own most of the wealth because they control the businesses. Since increasing profit is their first goal, owners pay workers as little as possible. Liebow, too, notices this when
he encounters homeless women who actually have some form of employment, but don’t make enough money to afford housing. Employers generally pay these women as little as possible, and the women have no way to fight the system.

Marx called the workers in a capitalist system the proletariat, the poor working class of society. They do all the work and the owners reap all the benefits. The proletariat lives in an unending cycle in which they work for low pay and then use those wages to survive. According to Marx, workers will never get ahead if they do not share in the wealth they create.

Why don’t workers do something to change their fate? Marx suggested that it was because people had a false consciousness, or a lack of understanding of their position in society. Marx proposed that the workers must develop class consciousness, or an understanding of one’s position in the system. He suggested that most workers do not truly understand how capitalism enslaves them. They think if they work hard, they’ll get by and perhaps thrive. Marx argued that these ideas were fantasy.

Marx believed that once workers recognized their positions, they would unite to end the tyranny. He proposed an overthrow of the private ownership of business, and instead suggested socialism. In such a system, the government controls the economic system, ensuring that all people share in the profits generated by their own labor.

Sociologists’ opinions on Marxist theory vary. Although some may hope for a type of class consciousness to arise and replace our current system, others think he oversimplified class struggle. His simple system of social class is difficult to apply to a complex postindustrial capitalist society, and even if you try, where would you draw the line between owners and workers? My student actually owned stock in the company that let her go, so was she a worker or an owner? Seems like both.

Marxist theory clearly remains active in today’s discussions of sociology. Marx felt that economic power should be in the hands of the people because wealth corrupts human nature.

These ideas continue to inspire sociologists. Let’s next look at the work of four conflict theorists, Martineau, Du Bois, Addams, and Foster, to study how gender, race, and class affect a society.

**HARRIET MARTINEAU**

Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), like Karl Marx, came from a bourgeois family and received the benefits and status that came with such a class distinction. However, she hoped that capitalism and industrialization would bring greater justice and opportunity. Martineau, one of the first female sociologists, did not just examine the inequalities in the economic system, she also focused on the inequality between the sexes.

In the book Society in America, Martineau analyzed the impact of slavery, the position of women in society, and the social customs within U.S. political and economic systems. She points out how these systems favor men who hold the power in society. Martineau’s studies noted hypocrisy and favoritism in the United States. For example, only white men could vote in the United States, despite the nation’s democratic ideals. Enslaved people and women did not have equal opportunities for political, economic, and educational involvement. Martineau pointed out that some people did not have the same opportunities as others. She not only paved the way for other female sociologists, but also expanded people’s thinking about the world, enlightening what would become the conflict paradigm.
W.E.B. Du Bois

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was an African American conflict theorist who agreed with a great deal of Marx’s thinking. After attending Fisk University, Du Bois moved on to Harvard, where he would eventually complete both his undergraduate and graduate work. His writings are vast, but he is often credited for initiating the study of race in America. He was particularly interested in issues of racial inequality in the United States.26

In his book *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois showed that poverty among African Americans in the United States was primarily the result of prejudice and discrimination.27 In the book, he reviewed the history of African Americans in Philadelphia and connected that history to the problems his contemporaries were facing. Implying that slavery and capitalism led to African Americans’ problems, Du Bois pointed out that history was influential over the present. He also noted that African Americans of his time had to live in two worlds, a white one and a black one. In one world, they were second-class citizens, while in the other they were equals. This idea, which Du Bois termed “double consciousness,” created tension and conflict for African Americans. He felt that with greater assimilation into the mainstream culture, African Americans would eventually lead better-quality lives.28

In many respects, Du Bois was the first and perhaps most influential sociologist to study race in the United States. He was a social activist, and he became more interested in working to improve life on the African continent and less interested in life in the United States. Du Bois eventually came to believe that African Americans would never be equal to whites because the white population would not allow this. For this reason, he left the United States and spent his remaining years in Africa.

When Du Bois saw extreme poverty, oppressive governments, and many wars in Africa, he realized that colonizing Europeans caused many of these problems. Colonialism was a primary way for European powers to generate wealth for capitalists while doing little to improve the lives of the African poor. Du Bois increasingly believed that the greed of the United States and western Europe was the cause of war and poverty throughout the world. To counter this, promoting economic justice and equality helps the world be at peace.29

Jane Addams

Laura Jane Addams (1860–1935) was born in Cedarville, Illinois. Addams’s father, a businessman and politician who worked to elect Lincoln and strongly opposed slavery, raised her. She earned a bachelor of arts degree from Rockford Women’s Seminary in 1882, then traveled to Europe, where she saw things that changed her life.

In Toynbee Hall, Addams witnessed the settlement house movement.30 The settlement house movement supported the
idea that poverty results from ignorance and structural barriers, not from fail-
comings in the morality of the person. The settlement house workers actually
lived and worked in the slums. Addams and a friend, Ellen Gates Starr,
decided to create a settlement house in Chicago. In 1889, they opened Hull-
House with these three principles:

1. Workers would live in the slums to better understand the problems there.
2. Every person has dignity and worth regardless of race/ethnicity,
gender, or social class.
3. Dedication, education, and service can overcome ignorance, disease,
and structures that perpetuate poverty.

Offering services from medical to educational, Addams also used her posi-
tion at Hull-House to write articles and books on a variety of topics such as
the rights of women and the poor. In many ways, Hull-House became
a laboratory for the application of sociological principles. In 1931,
Addams won the Nobel Peace Prize for her lifetime of service and dedica-
tion to peace.33

Through her teaching, writing, and action, Addams embodied the
best of sociology principles. Along with Albin Small, she helped found
the American Sociological Association and often guest lectured in sociol-
ogy classes at the University of Chicago. In order to understand the poor,
Addams felt that she must live among them. Once she comprehended
this situation, she wrote about it to change the system. These theories
impacted her work at Hull-House. These are the steps you will take in
learning to think like a sociologist.

JOHN BELLAMY FOSTER

John Bellamy Foster, a contemporary professor of sociology, often writes
using a conflict paradigm. His work is primarily concerned with the nega-
tive effects of capitalism on society and the planet as whole. In his
article, “The End of Rational Capitalism,” he points out that purely
capitalist economies, or economies in which markets are totally free, are
disappearing throughout the world.

In free-market capitalism, businesses seek short-term rewards by
working to expand markets. They do not care about long-term conse-
quences. As a result, Foster argues that businesses’ pursuit of wealth has
created environmental and global problems, including the existence of
extreme global poverty and inequality.

Foster argues that markets cannot “solve problems” because there
are no profits to be had from such an endeavor. Often, people suggest
that the United States is the wealthiest country in the world because we
have worked harder and used the capitalist system to give opportunity
and incentive to people. Foster reminds us that such a perspective
ignores important parts of history, namely the period after World War II
when most of the “industrialized world” was destroyed (except the United
States). The expansion of the U.S. economy was largely related to build-
ing up these devastated countries. This had very little to do with the
superiority of the American capitalist system. Issues such as the fall of
the USSR and the privatization of the Chinese economy seem to indicate
that capitalism has won and is “superior” to socialism. However, totally
free-market capitalism will result in the destruction of the environment and the exploitation of workers throughout the world. The long and short of it, according to Foster, is that capitalism requires expanding markets. Once the entire planet is developed, the system will collapse.

CRITICISMS OF CONFLICT THEORY
Critics of conflict theory often accuse it of being too radical. This paradigm often becomes synonymous with the idea that powerful people oppress the weak. However, most people seem to agree that the roles and rules of society “make sense.” For example, even after we discussed globalization and the depletion of factory jobs in the United States, my student who lost her job still felt that the U.S. system was “fair.” She said, “it still makes sense to me, even though I’m being hurt by it.” This illustrates the reality that most people in society tend to agree with the status quo. Certainly, some are victimized by racism, sexism, and other prejudices, but most members of society seem to agree that things are generally fine.

A simple reading of conflict theory can also seem to make the notion of conflict seem like a “bad” thing. However, doesn’t competition breed excellence? When I played baseball, I never worked harder than when my team got a new member, a young man who also played second base. I worked even harder to maintain my spot on the roster. Starting positions are rare, and the “conflict” actually improved my play.

After examining the works of functionalists and conflict theorists you’re probably thinking in a macro manner. Whether you’re using functionalism or conflict theory, you are thinking like many sociologists. Yet one more paradigm remains. If you believe that the way to change the world is through the individual, you might find symbolic interactionism appealing.

The Symbolic Interactionist’s Worldview
Symbolic interactionism focuses on how communication influences the way people’s interactions with each other create the social world in which we live. Symbolic interactionists believe that the root of society comes from its symbols. They suggest that the symbols we use are arbitrary, meaning that they vary from culture to culture.

Do you write with a pen or una pluma? Neither is wrong; one is a label in English, the other in Spanish. As long as you are with other people who speak the same language, you can interact.

A long time ago, I enrolled in a language school in Mexico. I lived with a family who spoke no English, and my teachers only spoke to us in Spanish. At first, I was totally lost. I clung to the members of the family with whom I lived as if I were a little child. However, I soon began to learn the language. It is amazing how our need to communicate with others helps us learn. Although the words or accents sound different, communication is central to all human interactions.

Of course, words are not the only symbols. Consider the photograph of flags from countries around the world. The flag that probably has meaning for you is the U.S. flag. However, people from China, Brazil, Belgium, or the United Kingdom probably feel the same way about their flags as you do about yours. These symbols represent entire nations, and yet you cannot identify many of them and they probably don’t hold much interest to you. This is because the importance of a symbol is rooted in the culture from which it comes. Just as language varies between people, so, too, do their symbol systems.

As you can see then, for interactionists, society is fluid thing. It is always in a process of change because how we use symbols and what they mean to us is constantly changing. For example, when I was in school, teachers might tell ethnic jokes, such as “Polack” jokes. Of course, now most of you have not ever heard these jokes. Why? Because people began to define such humor as unacceptable.

You can see then, that our definition of what has value depends on our understanding of it. Context and setting affects our understanding of a social event. You certainly behave differently in church than you do in a bar or on a golf course. Social order results when the members of society share common definitions of what is appropriate.
Disputes arise when we do not share the same definitions. Think about an argument you’ve had with someone recently. Did the fight stem from a different interpretation of meaning? For example, if your roommate eats your food without asking your permission, you might interpret that behavior as disrespectful and rude. However, he might feel that his behavior shows that the two of you are friends and share everything with one another.

Symbolic interactionism is the most micro of sociological approaches, as it often studies the activities of individuals and then draws connections to larger society from these. Studies of relationships, race, deviance, and even social movements can all use a symbolic interactionist approach.

Interactionists argue that individuals have the power to co-create the world, to make it what they want it to be. People develop standards and norms through a process of interacting with others. This way, we learn what is “normal” and acceptable behavior. Widespread social acceptance of a behavior is the main criterion in declaring it to be “normal,” and we quickly learn that different situations allow for different behaviors. For example, if you’re dating someone, kissing good night is a perfectly acceptable behavior. However, trying to kiss a co-worker good-night could result in your being charged with sexual harassment.

Symbolic interactionism is a distinctly American way of looking at the world. In many ways it blends sociology and psychology. Let’s take a look at the work of its founder, George Herbert Mead.

GEORGE HERBERT MEAD
Symbolic interactionism was the brainchild of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), an American sociologist from the University of Chicago. After his death in 1931, Mead’s former students were so committed to his legacy that they combined his articles, notes, and lectures into the book Mind, Self, and Society. This book introduced a new theory called symbolic interactionism.33

In Mind, Self, and Society, Mead suggests that the root of society is the symbols that teach us to understand the world. We then use these symbols to develop a sense of self, or identity. It is this identity that we then take into the world and interact with other identities to create society. Thus, the building blocks of society start with our minds, where we interpret symbols.

How do you learn to interpret symbols? Mead suggests that we do this through the micro interactions we have every day. When I was born, my parents named me John. When I got older, if someone called, “John,” I turned my head. Eventually, I learned nuances of the symbol John. For example, if my mother yelled my name, I knew I was in trouble. Mead argues that all these various symbols enter our minds, where their meaning is interpreted and we are told how to react. Mead suggests that this process is never-ending; therefore, we have a fluid sense of who we are. Our selves can change, and they do change based on how we interpret the symbols thrown our way.

In this way, your self develops. Self is your identity. It’s what makes you who you are and separates you from others. According to Mead, you couldn’t have a self without symbols or without someone to pass those symbols to you. In other words, you learn who you are through others.

In middle school, did you ever feel embarrassed by your parents? Do you feel the same level of embarrassment today? The answer to both questions is probably yes and no. When I ask this in class, most of my students report that they don’t find their parents nearly as embarrassing as they used to. Why does this occur? It is because when you’re young, you don’t have a well-developed sense of self. You are anxious, taking your cue from others as to what is “cool” or acceptable. You worry that your parents’ actions might reflect upon you. As you grow older, you’ve experienced thousands of interactions that have taught you who you are. This is why, the older you get, the less embarrassing your parents seem. You know yourself much better now than you did in middle school.

Mead proposed that symbols build society. Symbols have meaning, and meaning directs our lives. The symbols a society uses help us understand the people in that society. In the United States, we have accepted that we need the word “homeless” to discuss people who cannot afford housing. Symbols help us define a situation and determine what we should do about it. For example, Liebow finds that people often assign labels, such as “addict,” “alcoholic,” or “mentally ill,” to the homeless, but not as often to people who have jobs. Some even use addiction as an excuse not to help the homeless—Oh, he or she is just an addict. If potential employers believe in these labels, then they will be less likely to hire homeless people, perpetuating a system that keeps them homeless.

GO GLOBAL

Homeless Labels Around the World
Assigning negative labels to the homeless occurs not only in the United States, but also in countries all over the world. In Finland during the 1980s, homelessness became associated with alcoholism. People related the two ideas so closely that the government in Finland had to step in to prevent such negative stereotyping. In China and India, people connect homelessness with a lack of governmental registration, which means that the homeless aren’t seen as true citizens. In Peru, children living on the street are called piranitas, or little piranhas, which implies that they are dangerous and likely to resort to criminal behavior. People in Bangladesh equate homelessness with having a lack of morals.34

Criminal, alcoholic, immoral—these are only a handful of labels that exist for the homeless around the world. As Liebow noted, negative labels make it even more difficult for homeless individuals to rise above their situation. If people who are homeless are given an opportunity and adequate support, they can be just as successful and stable as any other members of society.
HERBERT BLUMER
Symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer (1900–1987), a disciple of George Herbert Mead and former chair of the University of California, Berkeley sociology department, established three basic premises that define the symbolic interactionist perspective:

1. Human beings behave toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and society.
3. These meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters.35

What does he mean? First, we all react to situations and people based on how we perceive them. Have you ever noticed that you can “dis” your mom, but if someone else does, you get defensive? This is because you ascribe meaning to the act of dissing that it’s OK for someone in the family, but when outsiders join in, you circle it’s OK for someone in the family, but when outsiders join in, you circle the wagons and defend the group.

How did your feelings emerge? They probably occurred from the many years in which your mother cared for you. While she may drive you crazy sometimes, she certainly fed you, tucked you in at night, and nurtured you when you were sick. In other words, the social interactions you had with her support the meaning you ascribe to who can and cannot dis her.

Blumer proposed that the primary focus of the interactionist approach involves studying individual interactions with symbols. This micro focus places great importance on the idea that symbols have great power to affect society as a whole. The way we talk about something creates the way we deal with it. Consider this example: In the 1950s, many whites spoke using racial slurs. Today, such language is socially unacceptable. Has this change eliminated racism? Certainly not, but the level of racism in the United States has certainly declined. Are these two factors connected? Blumer would suggest that they are. Words convey meaning and meaning creates reality. Eliminating racist language moves society closer to eliminating racism.

Normally, people interpret the words and actions of those around them and determine their behavior based on this interpretation. This results in rational behavior, meaning that we tailor our responses to the setting after we’ve interpreted the reactions. However, in a group setting our behaviors are somewhat different. Generally, Blumer suggests that in a group setting we react without the same degree of thought we use in an individual decision. At some point, people stop thinking rationally and act in ways that they might not consider acceptable in a different setting. Last football season, our college team was losing an important game. A man in the stands became extremely distraught; four-letter words came from his mouth like steam out of Old Faithful. The stands were filled not with sailors, but with men, women, and children, and I’m sure this man would never have behaved this way at a PTA meeting. So why did this happen? Blumer would suggest that it was the result of collective excitement, an intense emotional behavior that makes it hard for us to think and act rationally. This is what Blumer calls contagion, a rapid, irrational mode in which people do not think rationally or clearly. In such a setting, they “lose their heads” and react emotionally. In this way, you can see that individual interactions can create social realities. Eventually, someone told the man to watch his mouth because there were children around. Initially, the foul-mouthed man seemed angry to be scolded in public, but he quickly “cooled down” as he noticed that a number of people around him were watching his behavior closely.

How do we react when others are watching? Sociologist Erving Goffman developed a theory about this.

GOFFMAN’S PRIMARY INSIGHT IS THAT WE ARE CONSTANTLY TRYING TO MANAGE THE IMPRESSIONS THAT OTHERS HAVE OF US.

Impression management is the action we use to control what others think of us. When the angry man at the football game “calmed down,” it was probably because he was a season ticket-holder and he knew that we’d all see him again next week. He didn’t want to come off as the “jerk who cusses.”

ERVING GOFFMAN
Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) developed a theory he called dramaturgy, a theory of interaction in which all life is like acting. Goffman uses this theory to compare daily social interactions to the gestures of actors on a stage. People are constantly “acting” in order to convince people of the character that they wish to portray to the outside world. Not to say that people are always “faking it,” but rather that people are concerned about what the rest of the world will think of them, and they adjust their social interactions accordingly.

Frequently, we alter our behavior without much deliberate thought. For example, if you are on a first date, do you behave differently than the way you do with an old friend? Usually, on a first date you dress differently, talk differently, and eat carefully. You may be nervous, but you will also, without thinking about it, change your behavior. Why? Because you are taking extra care to make a good first impression, even if it means not being completely yourself. Goffman points out that managing impressions involves a complex series of actions and reactions. As a person gets older and has more “practice” in socializing, he or she may be better equipped to gauge the reactions that their actions will receive.36 Chapter 4 provides more detail on dramaturgy.

HOWARD BECKER
Howard Becker, a sociologist from Chicago, suggests that human action is related to the labels attached to it. In his book, Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance, Becker suggests that a label is attached to a
The label of deviant, or conformist for that matter, is applied when people see our behavior and react to it. This sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy for behavior as people seek an identity that will match up to the expectations that others hold of them. Becker applied these ideas to the study of deviant behavior, but the idea of labeling theory applies to all identity issues, including gender, sexual orientation, and personal identity.

CONTAGION is a rapid, irrational mode in which people do not think rationally or clearly.

DRAMATURGY is a theory of interaction in which all life is like acting.

Consider the example of a five-year-old girl who has been labeled a “good girl.” The theory would suggest that somewhere along the line, she did what others expected of her and that these people had power over her. Her parents asked her to take a bath and she did. She received a positive reward, “she’s a good girl,” and through repeated events throughout her life, she developed that sense of self whereby she never does anything remotely “dangerous” or out of line and always takes a bath. However, if this “good girl” becomes a “terrible teen” and her parents label her as a delinquent, she might stop bathing and start smoking. Becker would suggest that the label we ascribe to people has a major influence on their behavior.
CRITICISMS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Critics of symbolic interactionism suggest that this perspective ignores the coercive effects of social structure, focusing too much on the power of the individual to co-create his or her world. If, for example, you’re a slave, it doesn’t matter whether or not you reject the ownership symbol or not. If you try to leave, you’ll be punished.

Of course, we are all born into a culture and social setting. We don’t create them as we go along. As a result, your parents, neighborhood, and nation of birth all influence how you see things. Had you been born in a different time or in a different culture, you might have believed totally different things.

The Three Paradigms—How Are They Interrelated?

In the sports arena, we tend to associate phenomenal players with the teams on which they play. The player’s name and the team name become synonymous. Kobe Bryant and the Los Angeles Lakers. Tom Brady and the New England Patriots. Derek Jeter and the New York Yankees. You get the idea. The same is true of sociologists—we associate the theorist with the paradigm that he or she favored or had a hand in developing. For example, Marx is a symbol of conflict theory, whereas Comte and functionalism go hand in hand. However, sometimes it can be tricky to confine sociologists to such a tight box because they might use parts of each paradigm in their analyses. In fact, I know of no colleague of mine who is a “purist” in anything. That’s because no single paradigm perfectly fits every situation. To get a complete picture, many sociologists use all three paradigms. In this way, the three paradigms are interrelated and work together to help us figure out why society is the way it is.

Think about sociologist Robert Merton and his concept of latent and manifest consequences. He takes a functionalist stance, but adds to it the notion that intended and unintended results can arise. Thus, we should ask, for whom is this functional? Can you see a bit of conflict theory here?

Like Merton, symbolic interactionist Howard Becker also blurs the lines between the paradigms. Becker’s labeling theory can be linked to conflict theory because the labeling tradition suggests that those with power determine what is and is not labeled as deviant or criminal. In other words, the power of the label influences the outcome of the individual, but people with the ability to get what they want done put the label on us. Like a conflict theorist, Becker acknowledges that a system of inequality exists within our society. Consider this question: Why are cigarettes legal, while marijuana is illegal? Labeling theorists would argue that this is because people with power smoke cigarettes, but not pot. If powerful people ever started smoking pot, the practice would become legal.

We’ve seen how conflict theory overlaps with both functionalism and symbolic interactionism, but does functionalism ever overlap with symbolic interactionism? When Emile Durkheim suggests that values unify people, he sounds a bit like George Herbert Mead. The solidarity of a society for Durkheim is related to what it values, and he acknowledges that values change as societies become more modern.

The point for you as a student of sociology is to beware that just because a sociologist is classified as a functionalist, conflict theorist, or symbolic interactionist, that doesn’t mean that he or she won’t use other points of view in making an analysis of the world. In fact, at times, a theorist’s point of view can be so eclectic that he can’t be pinned down into a single category. This sentiment is especially true of sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920).

Overlapping Theories

- **Functionalism**: Everything in the social world exists because it has both an intended outcome and an unintended outcome.
- **Conflict Theory**: Inequality exists in the social world because of differences between different groups’ wealth and power.
- **Symbolic Interactionism**: Labels are attached to certain individuals; this practice sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy as people try to match their behavior to their labels.
Max Weber — Theorist Who Transcends Categorization

To me, Max Weber (1864–1920) is the German counterpart of Emile Durkheim because he wrote about a great variety of topics, used data in his analysis, and laid the foundations for high-quality sociological research. In his work, students often see a variety of ideas that seem to blend different schools of thought. Yet, he wrote at a time before many of these “schools” were clearly defined or established.

Because Weber wrote partly as a response to some of Karl Marx’s ideas, many consider him a conflict theorist. Weber accepted that social classes influence our outcomes; however, he felt Marx’s social class system was too simple. He proposed that all people have economic, political, and cultural conflicts that are related to their relative social position. As a result, being an owner does not necessarily make you important in society. Wealth is important, but political power and social standing are also important.

In other ways, Weber appeared to take a more functional approach, particularly when he discussed how bureaucracies function in society. Bureaucracies, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 6, are formal organizations that are organized into a hierarchy of smaller departments. You might think of a large corporation or a government agency as a bureaucracy. Weber proposed that rational and ideal bureaucracies naturally occur because we need them. They provide clear lines of authority, divide tasks so that workers can specialize, and clearly define rules and expectations. Under such a type of leadership, societies and large organizations function smoothly and improve the function of society. Although Weber was well aware that few perfect bureaucracies existed, he argued that responsible leadership will tend toward the ideal because Western society is increasingly focused on achieving goals, and a rational bureaucracy is an efficient way to achieve those goals.37

Other colleagues of mine have suggested that Weber’s ideas seem to lay the foundation for the symbolic interactionist school of thought.

Why? Because he pointed out how values influence our goals and affect our behaviors. In his book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber clearly linked a person’s religious value to the societal creation of a capitalist economy. For him, capitalism arose in the Western world primarily because a religious value system that he called “the Protestant Ethic” emphasizes the accumulation of wealth as a marker of God’s favor on a person.

Furthermore, Weber also discussed how values are important to the study of sociology. For example, he understood that sociologists are at risk of approaching their profession with personal values that might influence the outcome of their study. Weber stressed that sociology should be value-free. In other words, sociologists should study society as it is, not as they would like it to be. They should put their biases aside when analyzing a topic. He implied that personal values may impact social research, and therefore sociologists must strive to put such values aside when they make their analyses.

So, where does your professor put Weber? The more you read about social theorists, the more you will find that most of them blend ideas from all schools of thought.

Is Max Weber (pronounced VAY-bur) a conflict theorist? A functionalist? A symbolic interactionist? Or is he all three? Sociologists everywhere disagree on how to classify Weber. That’s because his views are so varied that he seems to defy categorization.
Wrap Your Mind Around the Theory

**FUNCTIONALISM**

Functionalists examine the entire social system to see how it works. Do food banks and homeless shelters solve homelessness or perpetuate it?

Functionalists suggest society works as an interrelated system. Communitarians understand that if society is to run smoothly, the government, the local community, and the business sector must all work together for the well-being of all. The root of society is the local community; it anchors this societal tree. The government carries the will of the people to the economic system, thereby functioning as the trunk of this tree. The leaves of a tree make the sugar that allows the entire plant to live. Of course, leaves without roots blow over, and roots without leaves die.

**CONFLICT THEORY**

Conflict theorists would view homelessness as a sign of inequality in society. Conflict theorists focus on social classes and their drastic differences in wealth, power, and prestige. They believe that the upper class controls society’s wealth and resources and exploits the lower class. If the upper class shared its wealth, conflict theorists argue, then homelessness would be cut down dramatically.

Conflict theorists look at the role of inequality in society. Does urban renewal actually increase homelessness by eliminating low-cost housing while lining the pockets of wealthy developers?

**SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM**

Symbolic interactionists see social interactions as a result of how we define our social interactions. Would you ignore this person merely because she appears homeless?

Symbolic interactionists would explore how homelessness affects the way individuals act toward one another. These theorists would ask: How do individuals behave toward one another? What labels do individuals assign to homelessness? How do non-homeless people interact with homeless people?

**WHAT CAUSES HOMELESSNESS IN A SOCIETY?**

Confront theory would view homelessness as a sign of inequality in society. Conflict theorists focus on social classes and their drastic differences in wealth, power, and prestige. They believe that the upper class controls society’s wealth and resources and exploits the lower class. If the upper class shared its wealth, conflict theorists argue, then homelessness would be cut down dramatically.

Symbolic interactionists would explore how homelessness affects the way individuals act toward one another. These theorists would ask: How do individuals behave toward one another? What labels do individuals assign to homelessness? How do non-homeless people interact with homeless people?
discovery sociology in action: why is community learning important to a society?

Getting Involved in Sociology—Community Learning

In Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women, Elliot Liebow discusses how he often “loaned” money to many homeless women who had absolutely none. He was always careful to consider the money a “loan” because he knew that simply giving it to them would show that he thought of them as nothing more than panhandlers. Liebow figured he wouldn’t get the money back, but he didn’t mind. His goal was to treat the women with dignity and earn their trust. Liebow was practicing community learning. Community learning occurs when individuals and groups work to identify and address issues of public concern.

It’s easy for people to believe that social problems are so widespread that there is nothing we can do about them. Often, we feel so out of touch with the world around us that we do not vote, we do not know our neighbors, and we cannot name our town council members. Community learning, however, can help you see things with fresh eyes. Working in the community expands your understanding of sociology and your world.

ACTIVITIES

1. What community learning opportunities are available in your area? Surf the Web to find local shelters, food banks, or other organizations in your community. Choose an organization and volunteer there. Write about your experience.
2. Research your local and state governments. Who are the important government officials? What roles do they play in the government? What policies and issues do they support?
3. Homelessness is just one of many issues that plague today’s society. What other social issues do you think are important to address and why? How would you try to solve these problems?

Liebow’s study of the homeless showed him that homelessness is a widespread problem, and there is plenty of blame to go around. There are too many people who don’t understand the problem, just ignore it, or both. When I worked at a local day shelter during my undergraduate days, I realized I had a lot to learn. One day, while serving lunch, I noticed that one of the patrons became quite irritated. “Hot dogs again!” he screamed. In shock, I thought that he had no right to complain when he could be eating nothing for lunch. An older and more experienced volunteer must have noticed my face because she said to me, “Sometimes, so many people look past them, that they just have to yell so you’ll know they’re there.” That sobering comment brought me back to my senses. When you actually take a minute to view the world from someone else’s perspective, you’ll find it hard to just sit around and do nothing.

From Classroom to Community | Helping the Homeless

“Homeless people are just a bunch of drug addicts, aren’t they?”

I wasn’t surprised when Theo, one of my first-year sociology students, made this comment during a lecture. However, I was disappointed because I knew that many people around the world share this view. After a lively debate on the subject, I realized I hadn’t changed Theo’s mind, so I challenged him to volunteer at a local homeless shelter.

Day after day, Theo worked with the families at the shelter—feeding, clothing, and talking with them. While at the shelter, he met a homeless mother who had been the victim of domestic violence.

“When I looked into that mother’s face and the face of her children, I realized how narrow my viewpoint had been,” Theo remarked to me later. “How did I ever think you could label an entire group of people?”

At the end of Theo's volunteer period, he wrote a paper for class revealing how much he had learned about the homeless. He even decided to continue working at the shelter. Volunteering made him feel like he was making a difference in the lives of the people he encountered, and he knew they were making a difference in his. Theo’s experiences helped him realize that the people at the shelter were just like him. The only difference was that they had fallen on some bad luck.

Theo’s story shows how moving out of the classroom and into the community helps people gain a new perspective. They can get out of their individual boxes and view the world as a sociologist would.
Chapter 1

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?  
A science guided by the basic understanding that the social matters: our lives are affected not only by our individual characteristics, but by our place in the social world.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THREE MAJOR SOCIOLOGICAL PARADIGMS? 
- Functionalism: Defines society as a system of interrelated parts; primarily a macro orientation because it focuses on larger social structures rather than individuals.
- Conflict Theory: Views society as an unequal system that brings about conflict and change; focuses on macro issues and supports the idea that the struggle for scarce resources holds a society together; concerned with inequality as it relates to wealth and power.
- Symbolic Interactionism: Focuses on how individual people interact with other people in their everyday lives; studies how the use of “symbols” influence how people communicate; follows a micro approach because it is concerned with the individual’s role in creating society.

WHY IS COMMUNITY LEARNING IMPORTANT TO A SOCIETY? 
Provides you with a fresh perspective and expands your understanding of sociology and your world.

get the topic: WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Theory

FUNCTIONALISM  
- Society is a system of connected parts working together to keep society intact.
- It is important to consider the function of any issue.
- Society is fairly stable, which means that things occur in society for a specific function.
- Suggests society will find a balance point of its own.

CONFlict THEORY 
- Focuses on social classes and their drastic differences in wealth, power, and prestige.

Key Terms

sociology 5  
sociological imagination 6  
macro 6  
solidarity 7  
social control 7  
egoistic suicides 7  
altruistic suicides 7  
fatalistic suicides 8  
anomic suicides 8  
paradigm 9  
functionalism 9  
conflict theory 9  
symbolic interactionism 9  
social laws 11  
social statics 11  
social dynamics 11  
social Darwinism 12  
mechanical solidarity 12  
organic solidarity 12  
manifest functions 13  
latent functions 13  
bourgeoisie 14  
proletariat 15  
false consciousness 15  
class consciousness 15  
self 19  
contagion 20  
dramaturgy 20  
community learning 25

MY SEARCH LAB

In this classic 1963 essay, Berger explains the unique aspects of the sociological perspective.

2. Berger calls sociologists “professional peeping Toms.” What does he mean by this?
3. What questions do sociologists ask when studying social phenomena? Use those questions to describe your college classroom.
**Sample Test Questions**

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

1. Which of the following is a criticism of conflict theory?
   a. It overlooks that fact that many willingly accept society’s rules.
   b. It does not recognize the differences between social classes.
   c. It fails to acknowledge social inequality.
   d. It is unsympathetic to homelessness.

2. Which of the following questions might a symbolic interactionist ask about the social world?
   a. Why does inequality exist in society?
   b. Why do income disparities occur between the races?
   c. How do social institutions keep society running smoothly?
   d. How does a particular social setting affect a person’s behavior?

3. Erving Goffman’s theory of dramaturgy suggests that
   a. people behave similarly in a variety of situations.
   b. people change their behavior to fit the setting they are in.
   c. people’s behavior has little to do with others’ perceptions of them.
   d. people’s behavior is not affected by the behavior of others around them.

4. Which could be considered a latent function of slavery in the United States?
   a. The ease in which crops were harvested
   b. The increase in the growth of crops
   c. The mistreatment of African slaves
   d. The wealth farmers generated

5. All of the following are macro orientations except
   a. functionalism.
   b. conflict theory.
   c. social Darwinism.
   d. symbolic interactionism.

**ESSAY**

1. The three sociological paradigms often overlap with one another. Choose a sociologist discussed in the chapter. Discuss how his or her ideas connect to all three sociological paradigms.

2. Why is it important for a sociologist to use a sociological imagination? What consequences might arise if he or she failed to use this way of thinking?

3. What sort of attitudes concerning homelessness might a symbolic interactionist discourage?

4. Why is suicide a compelling sociological issue?

5. Describe possible manifest and latent functions of a law that would legalize drugs.

**WHERE TO START YOUR RESEARCH PAPER**

To learn more about sociology as a scientific discipline, go to http://www.asanet.org

To find an in-depth sociology dictionary, go to http://www.webref.org/sociology/sociology.htm

For more information about sociology departments in the United States, go to http://www.sociolog.com/us_links/

To find a guide for sociological Internet sources, go to http://www.socioweb.com/

To find an online journal of sociology, go to http://www.ou.edu/special/freeing/

To find a Web site dedicated to finding out the truth about urban myths, go to http://www.truthorfiction.com/

To find an excellent source for different information on sociology, go to http://www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/theory.html