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Social Problems Through a Sociological Lens

Chapter Outline

- 1.1 What Is a Social Problem?
 - 1.2 The Sociological Lens
 - 1.3 Major Theoretical Perspectives of Sociology
- Summary & Conclusion

Grace and Elizabeth, two 9-year-olds in the same fourth grade public school class, are close friends. Elizabeth's mother wonders how long that will last, however. A sociology professor, Elizabeth's mom can see that society will influence Grace and Elizabeth in very different ways.

Grace and Elizabeth come from different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. Grace's mom is African American and her dad is a Nicaraguan American. They had Grace when they were teenagers and split up shortly afterward. Grace now spends most of her time at her mother's. On the weekends, though, she often sees her father and his new family. Her mother works as a waitress and bartender, and her father is an assistant manager of a grocery store. Neither has a college degree. When she is at her mom's apartment, Grace spends much of her time alone while her mother works. She watches television to keep from being lonely.

Elizabeth's parents are White and both have graduate degrees. All of her grandparents went to college. Her father is a city planner. They own their own home and often have Grace over for play dates and sleepovers. Grace loves coming over but has never invited Elizabeth to her home. Elizabeth has started to complain to her mom that she is bored with always having to play at her own house when she is with Grace. Elizabeth has also asked her mother to pack her a bigger lunch, because she always shares with Grace, who often does not have a lunch. Elizabeth also wonders why Grace has read so few of the books that she has read and does not do very well on tests in school.

As a sociologist, Elizabeth's mother can see that various social problems influence Grace's life, including racial and ethnic inequality, economic inequality, and educational inequality. She realizes that her daughter has greater **life chances**, or opportunities to succeed, than does Grace. These differences are likely to affect how the two girls do in school, when and if they marry, the jobs they will have when they grow up, their chances of facing imprisonment, and their overall health. These realities are borne out in a November 2011 U.S. Census Bureau study of children and poverty in the United States, which



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Sociological factors like race and economic status may impact a childhood friendship as well as life chances.

determined that 17% of White children under 18 lived in poverty, compared to 38% of Black children and 32% of children of Hispanic origin. The study also noted that children of poverty are more likely to have cognitive and behavioral difficulties, to complete fewer years of education, and, as they grow up, to experience more unemployment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). In 2011, research by the Centers for Disease Control determined that people in low socioeconomic circumstances are at increased risk for health problems, untimely death, and inadequate health care.

1.1 What Is a Social Problem?

Elizabeth's mother has been trained to look at the world through a *sociological lens*. Thus, she understands that people face some troubles that are individual problems and others that are social problems, and only society as a whole can remedy social problems. Grace and Elizabeth, like all Americans, live in a society in which social inequality plays an enormous role. As discussed throughout this book, social inequality influences the social problems confronting not only the United States but all of the world's nations. Remedying these social problems will mean reducing social inequality.

First, though, it is important to know how to recognize a **social problem**. The difference between an issue being defined as an individual problem and a social problem depends on four conditions:

1. Is the issue part of a **social pattern**, a repeated set of characteristics, behaviors, or events associated with a social institution or influence? Do more than just a few people face these issues?
2. Does the issue violate the core **values** of a society, or what we deem important? Does this social pattern violate a value we hold dear?
3. Does the issue negatively impact those in power—those who have the most control over how society operates? Do those in power consider the social pattern to be problematic?
4. Is the issue socially created? Can society do something to change it, if enough people choose to confront it?

For example, if test scores for lower- and middle-income students decline and are determined to be far lower than those of more affluent students, that is part of a pattern (condition 1). If our society values an educated public, this difference in test scores violates a core belief of our society (condition 2). If those in power consider declines in test scores problematic, they are likely to deem educational inequality a social problem (condition 3). If low test scores are determined to be a result of poverty, lack of opportunity, and lack of resources, society can address those things (condition 4).

The Social Construction of Social Problems

Sociologists are particularly interested in the fourth condition of a social problem: Is the problem socially created? In the field of sociology, social problems are said to be **social constructions**. Socially constructed things are those that a society and its members create by way of the many complex choices we make as humans. For example, a one-dollar bill is, simply put, a piece of paper. But in our society, the meaning of the one-dollar bill is socially constructed. We have determined as a society how many cents a dollar bill comprises, how much it can buy, and what its day-to-day value is in the global economy. The needs, values, interests, and behaviors of a society shape a socially constructed problem. Because a problem is shaped by society, it can also be addressed by society (Best, 2002).

Why do people, particularly those in power, determine that some, but not other, social patterns should be deemed social problems? Differences in power among social groups play a major role in the social construction of social problems. Social patterns of injustice may well

exist without being deemed social problems if those who face them are relatively powerless. But as groups gain power, they are able to draw attention to the discrimination they face and define it as problematic. For example, sexism and racism did not become defined as social problems in the United States until women and people of color gained increased power. Of course looking back from current perspectives on these issues it is clear that sexism and racism existed before the dawn of the Women's Rights and Civil Rights movements. However, it wasn't until the people primarily affected by these patterns gained power in society that what we understand now as the social constructions of sexism and racism emerged.

Another example of how the determination of social problems changes with perspectives and social values is the debate in the United States over same-sex marriage. In 1996, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which prohibits federal recognition of same-sex marriages and prohibits states from recognizing same-sex marriages that took place in other states. However, the individual states are free to legalize same-sex marriages. The various state laws governing marriage policy reflect the many differences of opinion on the matter. For example, New York allows same-sex marriage, while neighboring New Jersey grants civil unions for same-sex couples, and Pennsylvania bans same-sex marriage altogether.

The California Supreme Court ruled in May 2008 that same-sex couples could marry in California. Six months later, a majority of the state's population voted to ban gay marriage, a ban later found unconstitutional by an appeals court and that continues to make its way through legal challenges. Over the past few years, however, overall support for gay marriage has increased dramatically, with polls now indicating that more than half of all Americans support legalization of same-sex marriages (Silver, 2011). The number of Americans who regard being gay as deviant behavior has declined. In fact, many people now consider the denial of rights of gay couples to marry to be a social problem that our government must deal with.



Anthony-Masterson/FoodPix/Getty Images

Support for gay marriage has increased substantially over the past few years, demonstrating a shift in social values.

A Closer Look: Denial of Gay Rights = A Social Problem

To examine the perspective that the denial of marriage rights to gay people is a social problem, read the American Sociological Association's statement against a proposed amendment to prohibit gay marriage at http://www2.asanet.org/public/marriage_res.html and the American Psychological Organization's stance on same-sex marriage at <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/same-sex.aspx>. What are your thoughts about same-sex marriage? Do you consider denying gay people the right to marry a social problem, or do you consider granting those rights a social problem? Use the sociological lens to help you explain your answer.

Finally, problems are determined to be *social* problems only if they are produced by conditions in society that can be changed. For example, if a tornado destroys a town, it can cause tremendous hardships. However, a tornado ordinarily would not be considered a social problem. On the other hand, if unstable weather were traced to, say, human-caused global climate change, that could be viewed as a social problem. Or if in the aftermath of a tornado, the victims could not gain equal access to the resources to rebuild, that might be considered a social problem.

There is not always consensus on whether an issue is a social problem, whether it is a problem that is socially created, or whether it should be changed. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter 11, “Climate Change and Environmental Inequality,” there is clear overall agreement in the scientific community that we are experiencing climate change due, in part, to our overuse of fuels that create excessive carbon dioxide. However, the United States has not yet taken bold action to try to mitigate the problem. Many Americans are eager for the United States to invest in alternative sources of power and to create and enforce rules that will require businesses to curb pollution. However, others do not believe that humans are impacting the climate or do not think it important enough to establish rules that will require businesses and consumers to reduce levels of pollution. And some Americans argue that efforts to mitigate climate change will cost businesses money, leading to increased levels of unemployment.

Given how difficult it can be to establish a consensus about what defines a social problem and which of those problems are most pressing, it is often difficult for leaders to take the steps necessary to effectively address social problems. Political realities and competing interests complicate the picture. For example, President Obama has made clear his belief in the urgency of the climate change problem but has not pushed as hard as he might to address it. While his administration did require higher miles-per-gallon-minimums from car manufacturers (that should reach an average of 43 mpg by 2025) (Vlasic, 2011), he also turned down proposed rules from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that would have done much to reduce smog-creating chemicals in the air, claiming “It would impose too severe a burden on industry and local governments at a time of economic distress” (Broder, 2011). He presumably held off on taking these steps to address climate change rather than leave himself open to a potentially effective political attack from business interests and Republicans.

The Evolution of Social Problems

Social constructions are neither static nor objectively defined. They vary from society to society and change over time. For example, gender roles are socially constructed—what is considered acceptable behavior for males and females has changed over time and varies from society to society. For example, from the mid-1800s to early 1900s, female teachers in the United States were forced to resign their positions once they married. Today, of course, American female teachers can be married and are permitted to take leaves of absences to care for newborns. But because different cultures maintain different rules, values, and beliefs, the roles assigned to women vary tremendously among the nations of the world. For example, in Saudi Arabia, a law prohibits women from driving. By contrast, U.S. women have always been allowed to drive.

A Closer Look: Protesting the Prohibition of Female Drivers

Read about and listen to a story on the campaign against the Saudi Arabian law that prohibits women from driving at <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/16/137221701/campaign-protests-saudi-arabias-ban-on-women-behind-the-wheel>. Can you imagine living in a society in which you were not allowed to drive because of your gender? Think about how the society and time period in which you were raised impacts your ideas about appropriate behavior for men and women.

As societies change, so do the social problems of those societies. A look at how social problems textbooks have changed over the years illustrates this point. For example, in the 1980s, social problems textbooks in the United States began adding chapters on the environment and aging while discarding chapters on student protests (Lovely, 1982). These changes made sense in light of the changes in U.S. society during that time. During the 1980s, we became more aware of global climate change and human impact on the environment. At the same time, fewer protests erupted on college campuses as the antiwar and civil rights protests movements of the sixties and seventies died down and the baby boomers began to age and create strains in our Social Security and health care systems.



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Gender roles are socially constructed and differ from society to society.

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changed Americans' perceptions of accepted behavior for men and women. However, evidence that it still exists can be seen in Chapter 5, "Gender Socialization, Sexual Orientation, and Inequality"—and in the fact that a modern textbook about social problems still needs to discuss gender inequality.

In addition, what is considered to be harmful, and thus a problem, changes from one generation to the next. For example, as noted earlier, sexism was not always considered a *social* problem. But the protests of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s led to wider recognition of discrimination against women. Until this time, mainstream sociology did not perceive gender inequality to be a social problem. In fact, social problems textbooks published in 1967 did not define gender inequality as a social problem, but those published in 1977 did (Best, 2002). As women gained power in U.S. society, discrimination against women began to be more noticeable and less accepted. This led to civil rights legislation that barred discrimination against women in the workplace and in schools, and dramatically

1.2 The Sociological Lens

Can you imagine how someone might be so irresponsible as to not pay a bill she owes? Imagine if not paying that bill would result in losing the family home. Many people would look upon such negligence as a sign of individual weakness, stupidity, or even immorality. Now, what if you were told that in 2011 over 13% of American homeowners were at least one month behind on their mortgage payments or in foreclosure (Mortgage Bankers Association, 2011)? Suddenly, it no longer makes sense to regard people who are delinquent on their mortgage payments as individual *deviants*, or people who violate the rules of society. Instead, we start to see this phenomenon as a problem related to larger social conditions.

Defining the Sociological Lens

Using your imagination, you can expand your viewpoint from beyond your own personal experience to the wider perspective of society as a whole. Similarly, sociologist C. Wright Mills invented the term *sociological imagination* to describe how sociologists make the connection between what he termed “personal troubles” and “public issues” (1959/2000). Expanding one’s perspective like this is a little bit like the difference between looking through the narrow view of a telescope and the panoramic view of a wide-angle lens. The way of viewing the world to reveal how individuals’ decisions and experiences are related to social trends is known as the **sociological lens**. Using this sociological lens gives us the ability to relate what is happening in our own lives to social patterns and thus to connect the individual delinquent mortgage holders to a social trend. We can then begin to formulate a research question: What is going on in our society that would lead so many Americans to fall at least a month behind on their mortgage payments or even face foreclosure?

This book will look through the sociological lens to highlight the connection between what individuals experience and what is happening in larger society. Developing a wider perspective helps illustrate that the solutions to social problems necessitate changing society rather than simply changing individual behavior. The sociological lens can be used to reveal how individuals’ decisions and experiences are influenced by the society around them. Often, what may appear at first glance to be an individual problem will come into focus as being a societal issue.

For example, going through a divorce is a personal trouble. When we relate that personal trouble to data indicating that the majority of married people who aren’t college educated will end up divorced, we are looking at the issue through the sociological lens. Using this



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Sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the term *sociological imagination* to refer to the ability to connect the events of one’s own life to social trends.

perspective, it becomes clear that divorce is not just the problem of individuals who cannot maintain happy and healthy partnerships. Divorce is part of a social pattern whereby highly educated Americans—who are more likely to delay marriage until they finish their education—are more likely to stay married than those with less education, who tend to marry younger (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). If education and age affect divorce rates, it makes sense that divorce rates won't decrease unless society addresses those related issues. If societal forces influence why marriages fail or succeed, an army of marriage counselors won't be able to make much of an impact on divorce rates.

Likewise, if a person is overweight, that is a personal trouble. However, looking at this issue through the sociological lens, obesity becomes a social problem and not just the concern of a few people. Obesity affects a large swath of society—over the past 25 years, obesity rates in the United States have soared, such that one out of three Americans is now obese (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011a). Obesity contributes to many health problems, undermining the quality of life for millions of Americans and costing approximately 1.5 billion dollars a year in health care costs (Finkelstein, Trogdon, Cohen, & Dietz, 2009). Because quality of life, access to health care, and the cost of health care are important issues for many Americans, these issues are also important to the nation's leaders (Skiba, 2010). Finally, according to the Office of the Surgeon General, an individual's weight is the result of a combination of genes, metabolism, behavior, environment, culture, and socioeconomic status. And although genes influence obesity, the genetic composition of the population does not change rapidly. Therefore, the large increase in obesity in the United States must also reflect major nongenetic change (Hill & Trowbridge, 1998).

A Closer Look: Causes and Consequences of Obesity

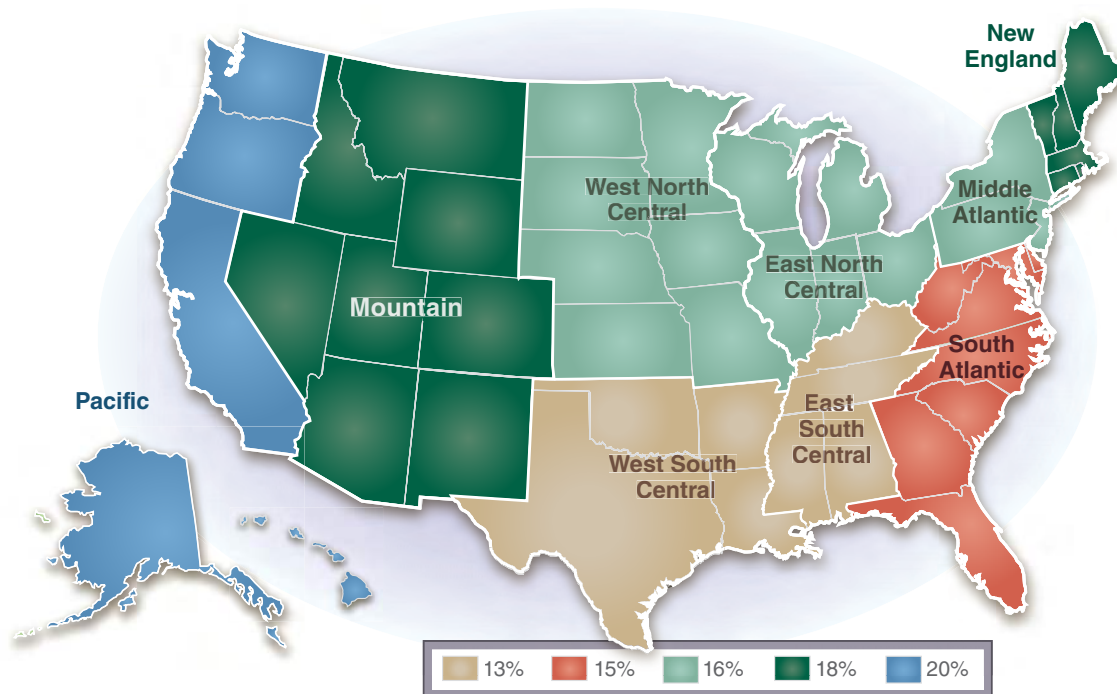
Learn more about the causes and consequences of obesity at the Center for Disease Control's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/causes/index.html>. Do you agree that obesity is a problem that society must be responsible for addressing? Why or why not? In what ways do you feel the issue of obesity should be addressed, if at all?

Much of the nongenetic change that has impacted obesity rates reflects changes in U.S. society that must be addressed on the societal as well as the individual level. For example, highly processed food that leaves a person craving more calories is now the cheapest and most accessible food for most Americans because of government subsidies for growers of corn, soy, wheat, and rice (Carr, 2010). In addition, the food industry has increased portion sizes of meals and beverages, leading to overeating (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Several societal factors also contribute to a less active lifestyle. The rise in popularity of sedentary activities like watching television, using computers, and electronic gaming competes with the appeal of sports and exercise. Moreover, in the past several decades the U.S. worker has become increasingly sedentary, and fewer people walk or ride bikes because public transportation and access to sidewalks and safe bike paths is limited in most areas of the country.

Further, obesity rates tend to be lower in certain areas of the country, such as the Northeast and West, than in others (Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2011). And, as Figure 1.1 indicates, obesity rates by region correlate closely

with rates of exercise. These social patterns interest sociologists because they reveal what types of behavior lead to lower or higher levels of obesity. Understanding these patterns enables sociologists, policymakers, and the public to begin determining how to address the social problem of obesity. (Chapter 9 will discuss social problems related to health care in more detail.)

Figure 1.1: Rates of exercise across the United States by region



Obesity rates across the United States correlate closely with rates of exercise.

Maury Aaseng

Source: Based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2008.
Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2008/sports/>

Applying the Sociological Lens

Once you begin to develop a sociological imagination you cannot help looking at the world through a sociological lens and perceiving the world around you from a sociological perspective. A sociological lens allows you to look beneath the surface of what is happening around you and notice the existing social patterns. When you use your sociological lens, instead of focusing on individual behavior, you look for patterns of human behavior. As you begin to notice these patterns, you will become more aware of social problems, like the obesity epidemic, and their impact on our society.

For example, instead of simply noticing that several of your classmates are complaining about the high cost of tuition, you begin to connect their complaints to skyrocketing tuition costs across the United States. You also see that declines in state support for public colleges, student aid, and loans have made college nearly, or actually, out of reach for

many Americans. This isn't a personal trouble for merely a few students. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reported in December 2008 that the rising cost of college threatens to put higher education out of reach for most Americans. However, better-educated workers tend to earn more over a lifetime, enjoy a higher standard of living, and enter the workforce with more skills and training that, in turn, helps the companies they work for thrive in a competitive global economy. As such, the increasing lack of access to higher education is a social problem that negatively impacts our society.

As you move the focus of your analysis of social problems from individual to social patterns, you also begin to notice how solutions might be created. At an individual level, a response to rising tuition costs may be to counsel college students to get a job, or an additional job, to help pay their tuition. By contrast, using the sociological lens may prompt you and others to advocate for broader responses:

- More state support for community and other types of public colleges
- Increased aid for needy students
- A reassessment of the ways in which funds are used on campuses to see if more financial assistance can be created
- Increased use of online teaching
- More low- or no-interest loans for students
- More programs in which students receive free or reduced-cost education or have their loans paid off if they commit to teaching in low-income neighborhoods for a period after graduation



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Religion is one of the key social institutions in society.

Viewing social problems as public issues rather than personal troubles tends to allow for a broader set of responses that can benefit more people.

Once we start using a sociological lens, we are able to recognize that people's lives are influenced not only by their individual actions but also by how society operates. Let's look again at Grace, the 9-year-old from a low-income family. Through the sociological lens, it becomes clear that Grace has a harder time in school than her upper-middle-class friend Elizabeth because of the influence of social institutions on her life. **Social institutions** are systems and structures supported by custom and laws that help carry out tasks for society and shape the activities of groups and people. The key social institutions are the economy, family, government, religion, and education. In every society, patterns of activity exist that create these five institutions. Each institution carries out functions necessary for society to work smoothly. But if they are not working properly, these social institutions can create social problems.

The impact of social institutions on individuals can be seen in Grace's everyday experiences. Her mother works two jobs to make ends meet. Some days Grace ends up without

a lunch to take to school because her mother is too busy to prepare it or doesn't have enough money to buy enough food. These factors, combined with the educational system's lack of free lunches for all students, leaves Grace without a sufficient lunch most days. Hunger impairs her ability to concentrate in school, which lowers her test scores. Because she's likely to eat whatever is offered, even if it's only the dessert from Elizabeth's lunch, her health may be affected. On the other hand, the economic status of Elizabeth's family enables them to have the time and money that translates into a healthy lunch that enables her to concentrate in school.

The Sociological Study of Social Problems

The study of social problems is the bedrock of the discipline of sociology. The very first sociologists were interested in studying society to alleviate social problems and improve the world in which they lived. In the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, the founders of sociology lived in societies in Europe and the United States that were facing issues of instability and inequality because of changes brought about by the industrial revolution, challenges to existing modes of government, and mass immigration. The myriad discoveries of explorers and scientists during this time gave people confidence that they could learn to understand the causes of these social problems and figure out how to address them.

When the field of sociology was new, its legitimacy as a field of science was sometimes questioned, so sociologists became concerned with bolstering their professional standing. As sociologists began to promote sociology as a discipline, "advancing sociology became more often an end in itself" (Calhoun, 2007, p. 10). Instead of focusing on studying and addressing social problems, many sociologists put their energies into showing how "objective" sociology could be in an effort to promote the discipline in an age when objectivity was touted as necessary (and possible) for a "truly" scientific profession. As sociology became an established academic discipline, it began to emphasize institutionalization and academic research and to lose the focus on its original mission.

Today, though, increasing numbers of sociologists are returning to the practical and activist roots of the discipline and using sociological tools to both better understand and address social problems. While a case could be made that all sociologists use the tools of their field to make an impact in the world, some sociologists publicly identify themselves as using sociological tools to bring about societal change. They are commonly referred to as *applied* sociologists and *public* sociologists. They focus on the real-world application of sociological research rather than primarily on academic research and teaching.

Applied and Public Sociology

Applied sociologists use sociological findings to make an impact on an organization, larger society, or both. Many applied sociologists are hired by organizations, such as businesses and nonprofit agencies, to evaluate the organizations and find ways to help them become more effective. For example, an Internet dating site might hire an applied sociologist for help in discovering what type of dating assistance will appeal to most potential users of their website. Do users want to search databases themselves, or do they want the site to provide them with the profiles of potential matches? What would attract more people to the website? As another example, an applied sociologist might be hired to evaluate a nonprofit organization's services to victims of intimate partner violence. The sociologist

may examine why there are so many vacancies in the agency's safe house. Do the services being offered meet the needs of the potential clients? Perhaps women are not permitted to bring their pets with them to the shelter and are therefore less likely to ask for that agency's assistance. An applied sociologist will evaluate the evidence to find the answers.

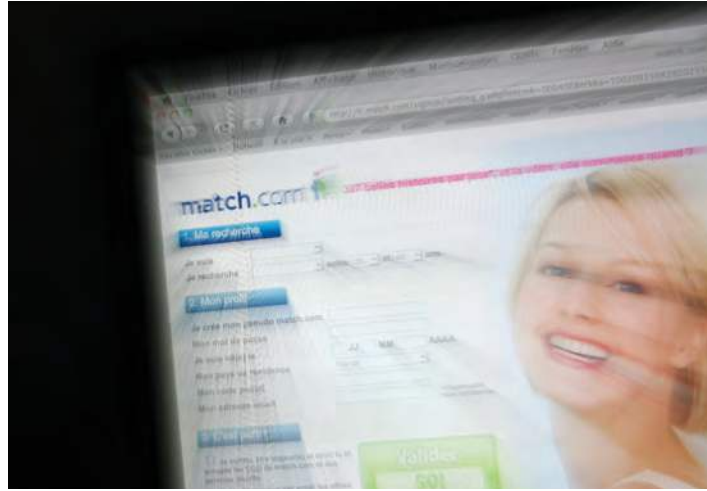
Public sociologists are in many ways like applied sociologists. They also use the tools of sociology to make an impact on society. Public sociologists, though, may not work for a particular organization or agency, as do most applied sociologists. In both academic and nonacademic settings, public sociologists find ways to make their sociological findings "public"—that is, presented in a way that is understandable to a lay audience, and disseminated in ways that influence the public discussion of social problems. Public sociologists, more than other sociologists, maintain that the responsibility of sociologists is twofold: They must use the sociological lens to notice patterns of injustice *and* use sociological findings to address those issues (Collins, 1998).

For example, a sociologist's research might uncover data showing that waste treatment sites are more commonly found near lower-income neighborhoods. He is practicing public sociology when he provides this information demonstrating a pattern of environmental inequality to major news outlets that publicize the findings, bringing them to the attention of those in power. Likewise, a sociologist who interviews students at her college to find out why retention rates vary by major and then uses those findings to implement better retention strategies, is practicing public sociology. Like the founders of sociology, these sociologists are conducting sociological research to illustrate how society works and how it might be improved.

How Sociologists Study Social Problems

Sociologists study social problems by using the *scientific method*. When embarking on a research project, social scientists carry out the following steps of the scientific method:

1. Choose a research topic.
2. Find out what other researchers have discovered about that topic.
3. Choose a methodology (how the data will be collected).
4. Collect and analyze the data.
5. Compare and contrast the findings with those of other researchers.
6. Present the findings for public review and critique.



AFP/Stringer/Getty Images

Using sociological findings to determine how to make an Internet dating site more appealing to users is an example of applied sociology.

When following these steps, sociologists must recognize that their position in society (including gender, age, social class, religion, nationality, political affiliation) influences what they want to study, what they observe, and how they make sense of what they observe. That is why it is important to rigorously use the principles of the scientific method to collect data so that bias can be eliminated as much as possible. And by carefully documenting the research process, others can carry out the same steps to determine if they come to the same (or different) findings.

There are various methods of collecting data, but they fall under two general categories: quantitative and qualitative methodologies. *Quantitative methodologies* are those through which data is collected that can be counted—data that is measurable. Quantitative data is expressed in numbers, such as percentages. The most common type of quantitative research is the survey, in which those being studied are asked questions and their answers are calculated and analyzed and used to make generalizations about the larger group. Quantitative research typically requires collecting data from a large sample of the group being studied. A good example of quantitative research is the U.S. Census' Current Population Survey. It provides information, for example, on unemployment rates and guides governmental programs designed to reduce those rates. Quantitative research often uses numerically coded survey materials that are counted and analyzed by using computer software.

Qualitative methodologies gather data that is difficult or impossible to quantify in numbers. These methods include interviews (asking a person questions), focus groups (group interviews), and participant observation (studying a group by participating in it). All of these means of data collection result in data that come primarily in the forms of words rather than numbers. Qualitative data collection methods tend to take more time, and they analyze a smaller sample of a studied population. As such, their results may not be representative of the entire population. This means that qualitative methods are lower in reliability than most quantitative methods—*reliability* is the likelihood that another researcher using the



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The U.S. Census' Current Population Survey uses quantitative methodology to collect data about people living in the United States.

same methods would come up with the same findings. However, qualitative data tends to be higher in validity than quantitative data—*validity* is the likelihood that the data reflects the true attitudes or behaviors of the population being studied. Researchers using qualitative methods often gain an “up close” picture of the people they are studying, which enables them to clarify their questions on the spot.

Let's look again at the earlier example of the applied sociologist who is trying to determine why victims of intimate partner violence are not using the

services of a safe house. If the sociologist chooses a quantitative method, she might prepare a written survey to give to all the agency's clients to determine the reasons they are not using the safe house. The survey might consist primarily of yes-or-no questions, making the data easy to quantify. If she chooses a qualitative method, she might meet with a sample group of the clients, interview them, and collect their stories and opinions about why they are or are not using the safe-house services.

1.3 Major Theoretical Perspectives of Sociology

Theories guide researchers' choices of data collection methods and help them make sense of the data they collect. Sociologists use theories to describe and make sense of social patterns. Without theories, they would have little or no understanding of why society operates the way it does and how they might improve it. Looking at the world through a theoretical perspective can also help sociologists detect patterns they might otherwise overlook and can help them decide where they should concentrate their focus. As you will see in Chapter 2, "Economic Inequality, Poverty, and Homelessness," the theory sociologists use can influence their analysis of a social problem. For example, while a sociologist using one theoretical perspective would explain crime as the result of people living without the opportunity to get a legal job, another sociologist, using a different theory, would explain crime as the result of living in an environment in which criminal behavior is rewarded and viewed as an act of bravery. The closest sociologists can come to completely understanding a social phenomenon is to study it from as many different perspectives as possible.

This book will use five major theoretical perspectives to analyze social problems: the conflict perspective, the functionalist perspective, symbolic interactionism, the race-centered perspective, and the feminist perspective. Let's take a look at the origins and characteristics of each of these perspectives.

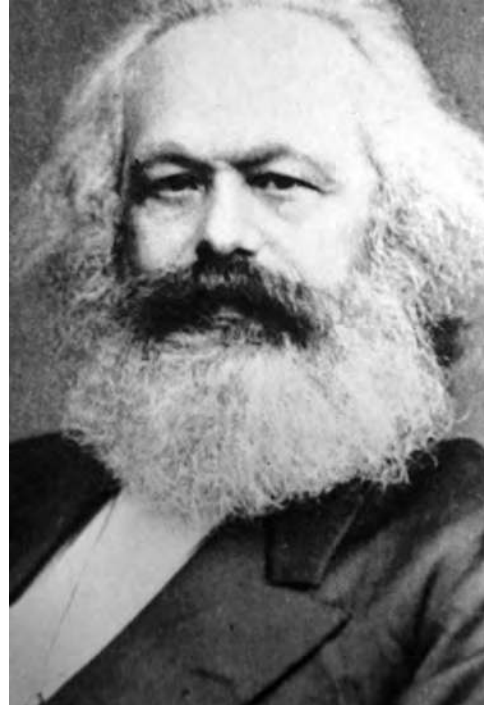
Conflict Perspective

Two sociologists who heavily influenced the development of the conflict perspective are Karl Marx and Max Weber.

The Marxist Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists maintain that society is made up of groups competing for power. German philosopher and historian Karl Marx (1818–1883) was the founder of this theoretical perspective. Marx was an *economic determinist*, meaning that he believed that those who control the *economic institution*, or the system that controls the distribution of goods and services in a society, also control the other institutions in society. His focus on the importance of economic systems throughout history and his knowledge of the plight of workers in the industrial age led him to conclude that society was founded on conflict between competing groups.

According to Marx, in a *capitalist* economic system—one based on private ownership and competition in a free market—there will always be conflict between the owners of the means of production, or the instruments and raw material used to produce goods, and those who work for the owners. This conflict will grow until the workers unite, overthrow the owners, and establish socialism as the new economic system. In a *socialist* society, the government controls the means of production (Marx & Engels, 2002). Marx imagined that the emerging socialist state would eventually “wither away” and become a *communist* utopia (Draper, 1970). In Marx’s vision of a communist society, everyone would work and be rewarded based on what they contribute to society and what they need from it. As he described it, the society would be based on the premise, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” (Marx, 1875, n. p.).



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Karl Marx believed that society was founded on conflict between competing groups.

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Marx maintained that throughout history, every economic age has had a *dominant class* that owns and controls the means of production and uses it to exploit those who work for them. For example, in the feudal era the two conflicting classes were landowners and serfs, and in the industrial era the conflicting classes were the factory owners and the workers. Marx believed that this cycle of control and exploitation would end when two conditions were met:

1. The workers realized that their interests were not the same as those of the owners. This would happen after workers developed a class consciousness, leading them to realize that they, as a class, were being exploited by the owners.
2. The economic means of production was sufficiently technologically advanced to easily support everyone in society, once the goods produced were distributed equitably.

According to Marx, workers, or the *proletariat*, operate under a “false consciousness.” That is, while they may realize they have less money than the owners of the businesses for which they work, they are unaware that the entire social system is rigged for owners to gain profit at the expense of the workers. Marx maintained that part of the reason for false consciousness is that those who own the means of production, or the *bourgeoisie*, also have the most control over the creation and dissemination of ideas. In Marx’s words, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (2004, p. 64). By this he meant that the most powerful class in society has disproportionate control over what is taught in schools, what is widely published, and what is preached from the pulpit. The dominant class can use its power to establish a dominant ideology—a set of beliefs that supports the prevailing economic or political system.

A Closer Look: The Media Elite and the Dominant Ideology Today

Marx believed that the ruling class's influence over public information prevents workers from realizing that the capitalist system is designed to exploit them rather than benefit them. Today, Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch owns large sectors of the media around the globe. See a visual image of the media he controls by going to <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/datablog/2011/mar/03/rupert-murdoch-bskyb-takeover#zoomed-picture>. A Marxist would suggest that this type of media monopoly would allow Murdoch, a dominant member of the bourgeoisie, to use the media to create a false consciousness among workers, particularly regarding social class inequality. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Max Weber and the Conflict Perspective

Like Marx, German sociologist and political economist Max Weber (1864–1920) believed in a conflict perspective. However, having been born several decades after Marx, he was able to build upon Marx's ideas to form a more complex picture of conflict in society. A son of a German politician, he lived during a period in which political machines and bureaucratic structures arose amid the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism. Influenced by these structures' effects on German society, Weber moved beyond Marx's focus on economic power and maintained that multiple forms of power produce inequality in societies.

Weber maintained that inequality stems from differences in an individual's economic class (most important in industrial eras), status (most important in feudal eras), and place in a party, or an organization designed to achieve a certain goal, such as a union, political party, or professional organization (most important in post-industrial societies). While Marx believed a communist revolution would eliminate major social problems, Weber believed that even if one source of inequality was diminished, one or more of the others would continue to produce inequality. The result is that every society experiences **social stratification**, with groups of people ranked according to their access to and possession of what is most valued in society, including money, power, and prestige.



China Photos/Contributor/Getty Images

The wide gap between the rich and the poor in China illustrates Max Weber's theory of social stratification.

China's recent history provides a good example of Weber's thoughts regarding multiple systems of inequality. After status inequality was largely eliminated during the communist revolution in China, the importance of party position came to the forefront with the rise of the communist party bureaucracy.

Today, after economic reforms in the late 1970s that allowed individuals to start businesses and that brought in foreign investments, class-based as well as party-based inequality exists in China, often overlapping. As a result, the gap between the rich and poor is now very wide and a source of resentment among the people of China (Moore, 2010).

Weber's work regarding bureaucracy is particularly relevant in our increasingly complicated world. When managed effectively, a *bureaucratic system*, marked by a clear hierarchy and formal rules and procedures, can be an effective means for running a large-scale organization or society. Powerful bureaucratic structures exist in all types of advanced nations, no matter what their system of government. From a sociological standpoint, whoever controls the government bureaucracy has tremendous power over all aspects of their society. Those who dominate bureaucratic structures have the power to control other key institutions in society, such as business and the military, and determine the standards by which other bureaucracies will function. Once formed, bureaucracies are very hard to dismantle, even when the individuals in charge are replaced. People at all levels of bureaucratic structures are dependent upon those structures and unlikely to challenge the people above them or the legitimacy of the structure itself. This can have a profound effect on a society's willingness and ability to address social problems influenced by bureaucracies.

Functionalist Perspective

According to the **functionalist perspective**, society is like a biological organism, with each organ depending on the others for survival. Functionalists believe that society is made up of interdependent parts, each working for the good of the whole, rather than composed of competing interests, as conflict theorists maintain. Their focus is on how society remains stable through the proper functioning of its various social institutions.

Émile Durkheim

French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), the founder of the functionalist theoretical perspective, believed that humans are selfish by nature and must be channeled and controlled through proper socialization by social institutions. According to Durkheim, properly functioning institutions such as the education system, occupational associations, and religious institutions ensure that individuals work for the good of society rather than just for themselves. These institutions teach people to follow rules of behavior that benefit an entire society and keep it functioning smoothly.

In preindustrial societies, rules of behavior are easily understood and followed because most people carry out similar tasks and have similar goals. Durkheim ([1893]1964) referred to these simple types of society as *mechanical*. However, as a society becomes more complex and moves from a mechanical to what Durkheim called an *organic* society, the work people carry out becomes more specialized. The result is that commonalities that bind people to one another and give them a sense of *solidarity* with other members of their society no longer exist. Although people become increasingly interdependent—for example, factory workers are dependent on farmers for food, and farmers are dependent on factory workers for tractors and other equipment—they may feel they have less in common and, therefore, feel less bound to one another.

In an organic society, people may experience *anomie*, or a lack of social standards, also referred to as normlessness. Without clear guidelines, or **norms**, to follow, people may no longer feel they are a part of society. They may become depressed, perhaps even suicidal, and more likely to commit *deviant*, or norm-breaking, acts. Durkheim believed that in these types of societies it is vital that social institutions teach people new norms and foster a sense of loyalty and commitment to work for the greater good. According to Durkheim, a commitment to working toward the greater good includes acknowledging that inequality in society is useful. Durkheim (1964) believed that a system of differential rewards serves a positive function for society. Some people have more talent than others, and he believed that the people who best do what is most needed for society should be rewarded more than those who are not as talented and do not contribute as much.



Jack Hollingsworth/Thinkstock

Emile Durkheim believed that social institutions such as education systems are essential for proper socialization.

However, he was aware that not all inequality is based on people's innate talents and contributions to society, or what he termed **internal inequality**. He also recognized the existence of **external inequality**, which is forced upon people by societal factors such as lack of access to education, health care, housing, and other resources. He believed that external inequality is harmful for society. Society needs all its members doing what they do best for it to function most effectively. External inequality that prevents people from developing their innate talents damages all of society and should be eradicated. For example, all of society suffers if someone with the capability to improve our public transportation system never fulfills this potential because she was raised without opportunities, attended a school with teachers who did not encourage her engineering talents, and was not admitted to college. Durkheim maintained that social institutions should create opportunities for all people to become engaged citizens and share their gifts.

Robert Merton

American sociologist Robert Merton's (1910–2003) contributions to the functionalist perspective include his acknowledgement of dysfunctions and his concepts of manifest and latent functions. *Dysfunctions* are social patterns that have negative consequences. *Manifest functions* are the consequences of planned and expected social patterns. *Latent functions* are the consequences of unplanned or unexpected social patterns and often go unrecognized.

Merton believed that it is important to notice dysfunctions so they can be addressed. For example, the practice of factory owners hiring undocumented immigrants to exploit for cheap labor clearly harms both the workers and unemployed citizens who might otherwise fill those jobs. However, looking at this issue in terms of one individual factory

owner might prevent us from recognizing how such an economic system is also dysfunctional for all factory owners. Looking through the sociological lens, factory owners might recognize that hiring “cheap” labor is not in their larger self-interest and actually produces latent dysfunctions. It harms factory owners in general to be forced to break the law and exploit people in order to successfully compete with other owners who are also exploiting undocumented workers. When they hire and exploit undocumented workers, factory owners face increasing financial pressure from other owners who may choose to pay workers less, they risk government fines and possible work stoppages, they may see a decline in customers because so many citizens are unemployed or have shrinking wages because of the exploitation of undocumented workers, and many may experience moral unease. Merton would point out that without first noticing and uncovering these latent dysfunctions, we cannot alleviate them.

Often what is dysfunctional for one group is functional for another. For example, a college admissions system based primarily on SAT test score rankings rewards upper-income students with highly educated parents but is dysfunctional for students who lack the same opportunities. (In addition, controversy has simmered for years over whether the SATs are biased in favor of white students.) For many years, this latent dysfunction was both unintended and unrecognized, but today many people are aware of how relying heavily on such tests to predict who will do well in college benefits students from wealthy, highly educated families and harms those who come from poor and less educated families.

Merton was interested in how class could affect people’s *life chances*, their opportunities to improve their quality of life. He applied the concept of *strain*, identified by Durkheim, to create a theory that could explain why some people are more likely to commit crime than others. Merton found two elements of society that interact to create strain: socially defined goals and the socially accepted means to achieve them. For example, the traditional American Dream includes attaining a nice home, car, and possessions. Acceptable means for achieving these goals include getting an education and working hard at a legal or legitimate job. But Merton argued that not everyone in the United States has an equal



Blend Images/Ariel Skelley/The Agency Collection/Getty Images

Although many people hope to achieve the American Dream, not everyone in the United States has an equal chance to do so.

chance to earn a good income through legitimate means. People of lower economic status do not have the same opportunities as the affluent. When the goals are the same for everyone but the paths to achieve them are blocked for some, the result is strain. Strain leads to anomie in those people unable to participate through legal means. As a result, some may react by developing criminal or deviant responses to the struggle of attaining these goals.

Merton advocated the development of what he called *middle-range theories*, based on

observable, real-life events. Through data collection, these events could then be empirically analyzed and used to make general statements about a particular social phenomenon. Middle-range theories lie between those that sociologists develop in their day-to-day observations and the effort to develop an all-inclusive, unified theory that covers all aspects of social life. Thus, Merton had an enormous influence on the way today's sociologists analyze and address social problems.

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Two pioneers of the symbolic interactionist perspective were George Herbert Mead and Jane Addams.

George Herbert Mead

American sociologist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) was interested in studying oppressed groups in the United States, such as poor workers and immigrants. Interested in making an impact in the real world, Mead used his sociological expertise about the influence of the social environment to contribute to several social programs and movements in Chicago. For example, he advocated for reform of the public school system to provide tenure for teachers and give them greater influence over how they could teach students. He also conducted research on the living conditions of immigrants who worked in the stockyards of Chicago and helped bring about the establishment of public organizations that made use of his findings, such as the Department of Public Welfare and the Immigrants Protective League (Cook, 1993).

Mead was particularly interested in how the human self develops through communicating with others via language and *symbols*, or nonverbal behavior and objects. This process is known as *symbolic interaction*. According to Mead, our interactions with one another are what make us human. The nature of our interactions with others determines how we see ourselves and our role in society. In turn, our actions are conditioned, though not determined, by the social situations in which we find ourselves (Mead, 1934).

Symbolic interactionist theory maintains that society is a social construct, continually created and recreated by humans' interactions with one another. We may not realize it, but society is maintained by our implicit agreement to follow certain patterns of behavior as we interact with one another. As we "practice" certain patterns of interaction, we reinforce the belief that society "just works that way." Therefore, symbolic interactionists maintain that by changing how we interact with one another, we can change society.

For example, at one time it was accepted practice—and the law in some areas—for Black Americans to sit in a separate area from White Americans in a restaurant, if they were allowed to enter the restaurant at all. Race symbolized social status, and people interacted with one another differently based on race. What would have happened, though, if a light-skinned Black person "passed" as White and was seated with Whites? Nothing, unless someone "recognized" that person as Black, perceived that a societal norm had been broken, and alerted others to that norm violation. Now imagine the same restaurant but in the present day. If a server told a Black customer she had to sit in a particular section of the restaurant because of her race, how would people react? We are in the same

restaurant, in the same country, but the rules of social interaction have changed. This example demonstrates how norms in society are social constructions that change over time and from society to society.

Similarly, the symbolic meanings of nonverbal gestures can vary from society to society. For example, an Iraqi could be offended if he were to receive the “thumbs up” sign from an American—this gesture is interpreted as an insulting “up yours” in Iraq (Axtwell, 1997). In addition, how symbols are displayed can impact their meaning. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, lapel pins in the image of the American flag were routinely worn to symbolize patriotism, particularly by political candidates. The way the pin was worn was also important—a flag pin worn upside down signified disapproval of the United States—the U.S. flag code prohibits displaying the flag upside down except for as a signal of extreme distress (Luckey, 2008).

The symbolic meaning of gestures and objects can change over time, just as behavior and interactions can. For example, wearing a swastika patch on the sleeve of a jacket changes with time and place. It was once necessary in certain societies for citizens to adorn themselves with such a symbol to indicate allegiance to the reigning political and ideological cause. What would happen today if a person walked around with a swastika patch on his jacket? Would the reaction to that symbol in rural Arkansas differ from the reaction in urban New York City? Would the reaction in Ireland differ from that in Germany? These are the types of questions that interest symbolic interactionists.



Jose Luis Pelaez/Blend Images/Getty Images

The symbolic meaning of a gesture can vary from culture to culture. The okay hand gesture commonly used in the United States might be interpreted as an insult in other countries.

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Jane Addams

One of Mead’s contemporaries, American reformer Jane Addams (1860–1935), is considered not only one of the founders of sociology but also the founder of modern social work. With her friend Ellen Gates Starr, Addams established one of the first settlement houses in the United States in 1888. *Settlement houses* were reform institutions, most often in the form of large buildings in urban immigrant neighborhoods, similar to today’s neighborhood centers. This model was based on the vision that middle- and upper-class people could move to the city and serve the poor while living among them. People in need, such as poor immigrants and women would be exposed to the culture, values, and knowledge of the educated workers while they all resided in the same large households. Meanwhile, those who worked at the settlement houses provided social services and advocated for social policies that would empower and protect the members of these lower-income and working-class groups. Addams and Starr’s Hull House became the model for settlement houses in newly developing urban areas throughout the United States.

While Addams and her partners at Hull House helped to initiate a grassroots social reform effort, they soon recognized that larger structural changes within society were necessary to address not only the symptoms but the causes of inequality. She and other Hull House residents worked to improve policy in the juvenile justice system, secure women the right to vote, strengthen workers' rights, establish child labor laws, and advocate for greater access to education and skills training. In addition, Addams and her colleagues advocated for job creation and improvements made to the physical infrastructure of the country. They knew that people would never escape the cycle of poverty if they didn't have safe places to live and employment that paid a livable wage.

Addams was formally recognized as a leader in reforming social policy when, in 1931, she became the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Race-Centered Perspective

American reformer and activist William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B.) DuBois (1868–1963) was the founder of the race-centered theoretical perspective, which looks at society primarily through the prism of racial inequality. Sociologists with this theoretical perspective see race as “an independent and irreducible social force in the United States, a distinct aspect of social organization and a unique lens onto the whole of social life” (Hartmann, 1999, p. 23). They maintain that divisions in society are based predominantly on race rather than on class, as Marx theorized.

Race-centered theorists focus on how and why racial hierarchies are actively maintained by those who benefit from them, delving into racial ideologies, identities, and other aspects of social cultures that help to perpetuate racial divisions and inequality. This perspective helps sociologists understand racial inequality in the United States and elsewhere and how it might be alleviated. Race-centered theorists seek to understand how, in an increasingly diverse society, the racial hierarchy adjusts to changing racial and ethnic demographics. Race-centered theorists reject the idea of **colorblindness**—the notion that if we act as though race does not matter then it won't—and dismiss the notion that we are in a post-racial society. They point out the glaring disparities in wealth, income, education, and incarceration rates among Whites, Blacks, Hispanic-Latinos, and American Indians as some of the many indications of still-high levels of racial inequality in the United States.

Critical race theorists, such as American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, use a race-centered interdisciplinary perspective to examine issues of racial inequality and advocate for racial justice. Like many sociologists today, critical race theorists are keenly aware of intersecting types of oppression. For example, a Black woman must deal with both gender and racial inequality. Collins (1990) coined the term *intersectionality* to describe the experience of facing multiple sources of oppression.

Feminist Perspective

Just as race-centered theories focus on racial inequality, **feminist theories** are used to explain the social processes that have created and continue to perpetuate gender inequality. Like critical race theory, feminism is multidisciplinary, and feminist theorists can be found in numerous fields of study. Theorists who use the feminist perspective today are also very aware of the connections among race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. It is

not unusual for feminist theorists to incorporate elements of conflict theory and symbolic interaction theory within their theoretical framework.

Sociologists who employ a feminist perspective have helped to focus attention on *gender roles*—the expectations and rules for behavior assigned to men and women—showing that they are social constructions that can vary over time and from society to society. Before feminist theories gained prominence in sociology after the second wave of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s, most people, including many sociologists, assumed that differences in the roles of men and women in our society were due primarily to biological causes. Feminist theorists have deepened our understanding of how social, political, economic, and gender inequality relate to cultural and structural forces in society.

Like other sociological theories, feminist theories provide us with the tools to notice and make sense of experiences that might otherwise be overlooked as individual incidents. For example, a woman’s complaint that her opinions are being ignored in a business meeting might be dismissed as an isolated event. However, when sociologists note that such



W. Breeze/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Feminist theorists help to understand gender roles and inequalities between women and men.

behavior can be found in meeting rooms throughout society (Tannen, 2001), it begins to be defined as a social problem that must be addressed. Similarly, when a study finds that students deem their male professors more competent than female professors (Laube, Massoni, Sprague, & Ferber, 2007), those attitudes can be traced to gender socialization and gender-based norms.

A variety of feminist theories have been developed to explain gender inequality. Judith Lorber (2005) breaks these theories into three umbrella groups: gender reform, gender resistance, and gender rebellion:

- *Gender reform feminists* maintain that gender inequality is caused by how society is structured. They advocate gender balance between men and women in government, the workplace, and in domestic duties.
- *Gender resistance feminists* “claim that the gender order cannot be made equal through gender balance because men’s dominance is too strong” (Lorber, 2005, p. 14). They maintain that trying to achieve gender balance would simply result in women being forced to act like men. Instead, they advocate for recognizing the value of the “feminine” characteristics of women (their ability to mother children, to nurture and to be emotionally supportive) and protecting women from sexual violence.
- *Gender rebellion feminists* note that systems of stratification are complex and that social categories of race, ethnicity, social class, religion, and sexual orientation, as well as gender, have been used to rank and divide groups of people. Gender

rebellion theorists advocate dismantling the existing gender order by blurring the distinctions between males and females and among sexual orientations. They maintain that gender and sexual orientation are flexible concepts and not static.

All feminist perspectives draw attention to individuals' **situated vantage points**, based upon their social standing in society and how this influences their view of the world. Feminist theorists generally believe that the structure of society is patriarchal (male dominated). Like critical race theorists, though, feminist theorists acknowledge that there are multiple forms of domination in our society that impact people's perspectives.

Feminists today are also very aware that divisions exist within genders as well as between them and that these differences can impact the solidarity of women. For example, an impoverished African immigrant woman is disadvantaged in our society because of her class, race, immigration status, and gender. These categories can be in conflict and prevent her from uniting with others based on competing class, gender, racial, or cultural interests. While a Marxist would say that she should share a class consciousness with other poor people, she may not feel as if she has much in common with poor Americans (or they with her). At the same time, she may not feel solidarity with feminists if she perceives that they are focusing on issues unrelated to her status as a poor person, a person of color, and an African immigrant.

Throughout this book, you will explore how each of these theoretical perspectives influences how sociologists perceive and respond to various social problems.

Using the Sociological Lens: The Great Recession and the American Dream

Despite economic downturn the American Dream is alive and well—or is it?

The American Dream has long been the epitome of hope, freedom, and success, in both the United States and abroad. Although the concept is enshrined in the egalitarianism set forth in the U.S. Constitution, the phrase was popularly coined by writer James Truslow Adams in 1931, when he articulated the universal hope that life be increasingly “better and richer and fuller,” with opportunities for advancement for everyone who sought them. Adams specifically believed the American Dream should be about more than the ability to buy fancy cars and make an impressive salary; his vision was for a society in which men and women of all backgrounds and “birthrights” achieve their maximum potential.

The numerous recessions since Adams expressed this vision have chipped away at the American Dream, redefining it in increasingly less poetic and more materialistic ways. In the 1950s and 1960s, the American Dream became primarily about home ownership, with owning a home becoming the predominant way middle class people differentiated themselves from the poor. By the 21st century however, the Great Recession forced millions of Americans to lose value on their homes, or lose their homes altogether, to the extent that home ownership was no longer universally viewed as possible, or even desirable. As a result, the definition of the American Dream shifted again. A 2011 survey by the National Endowment for Financial Education found that just 17% of Americans equate home ownership with the American Dream; 47% said the new American Dream is simply to have enough money for retirement.

“Of the 13 recessions that the American public has endured since the Great Depression of 1929–1933, none has presented a more punishing combination of length, breadth and depth than this one” (Pew Research Center, 2010). So began a comprehensive 2010 study by the Pew **(continued)**

Using the Sociological Lens: The Great Recession and the American Dream *(continued)*

Research Center on how the Great Recession has altered life in America. The widespread impact of the Great Recession and the shifting definition of the American Dream illustrate how such ideals are social constructions that transform over time as situations, perspectives, and social values change. While certain segments have been harder hit than others, the Great Recession is unique in the way in which it has affected nearly every economic and social class.

Alive and Well

People of all walks have life have been affected in some way by the Great Recession. Where some lost houses, others lost jobs; where some lost savings; others lost hope. Indeed, this hopelessness may turn out to be one of the recession's most long-lived consequences. The National Endowment for Financial Education (2011) found that fewer Americans believe that each generation will increasingly be able to do better than the next (another classic component of the American Dream): 62% said their parents have achieved the American Dream, while just 57% said they themselves are living it. Only half of respondents in a different poll (by ABC News/Yahoo) said they thought the American Dream was still true.

The pessimism blanketing the country is at best disheartening and at worst economically crippling. A pessimistic population tends to make conservative, inward decisions that have far-ranging and long-term effects on society. "The contest between pessimism and optimism has real effects on the way we live," points out *Los Angeles Times* reporter Doyle McManus (2012). "Pessimists don't stimulate the economy by buying new houses or big-ticket consumer goods. Pessimists don't invest money in the stock market. Pessimists, as Putnam and Brand both discovered, don't participate in community-building organizations. Pessimists don't even have babies." (McManus, 2010)

How the recession will create a new American normal and how it will redefine the American Dream remains to be seen. In the following perspective, pollster John Zogby argues that although all Americans have been touched in some way by the recession, the American Dream is still strong.

John Zogby, "The American Dream Is Still Strong," *Forbes*, January 29, 2009. http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/28/american-dream-polling-opinions-columnists_0129_john_zogby.html

Slipping Away

The Pew Research Center's work crystallized just how much the Great Recession changed America by showing that in addition to the job losses, drop in home values, and hits to retirement accounts, Americans of all walks changed their spending habits, leisure time activities, and life goals. Some sectors experienced job losses, others cuts in salary. Some Americans who kept their jobs became required to take furlough (forced unpaid) days off or were transitioned to part-time schedules. If workers maintained a regular number of hours, they may have lost benefits or were required to contribute more toward them. When the recession did not affect a person's job, it may have affected their home, depressing its value or forcing an owner into short sale or foreclosure. Where home values stayed intact, retirement portfolios shrunk; when the older generation remained on solid footing, their children returned home from college, unable to find a job after years of training. Where people were economically untouched, they became psychologically affected, fearful for their future, or for their children's future. All of these factors affected the way people spent their money and time, for whom they voted, and *(continued)*

Using the Sociological Lens: The Great Recession and the American Dream (*continued*)

how they perceived of their communities, their country, and themselves. In short, the Great Recession affected every corner of life for nearly every sector of life.

Americans reported becoming more frugal, with 71% saying they bought less expensive brands, and 57% saying they either cut short vacations, took fewer of them, or took none at all. The recession also dug into surprisingly personal areas of life, especially among the younger generation. Though this group was not overwhelmingly affected by drops in retirement savings or home values, many new graduates were forced to return home to their parents' house after being unable to find a job after college. Being unable to find a job affected their ability to start a career, which significantly affected their confidence and identity. It also affected their dating habits, with many reporting being unable to afford to date or that the opposite sex viewed them as undesirable because of their lack of work. For those that got through the dating process, 11% of Americans said they had postponed getting married or having children as a result of recession-related factors. The *Los Angeles Times* confirmed this in 2010 when it reported that birthrates fell sharply two years in a row in states such as California and Arizona, where unemployment and foreclosure rates are high (McManus, 2010). The drops reflect people's unwillingness to embark on expensive, anchoring endeavors such as childrearing when their financial future is uncertain.

The recession also affected people's civic commitments to their community. With less money to spend, American families predictably exhibited a tendency to hunker down at home where entertainment was cheap or free. But studies suggest that in doing so, they cut larger social, psychological, and civic ties with their communities. Many communities hit hard by the recession saw church, volunteer groups, political organizations, and social club attendance and memberships drop. A study undertaken by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, studied the ripple effect unemployment had on families in Wisconsin. They found that people who lost their jobs were about 30% less likely to participate in community events and activities (McManus, 2010). Depression, shame, loss of trust in society, unpredictable schedules, and the need to move away from the community were all contributing factors. Worse, withdrawal from community was likely to persist over decades: some of the Wisconsin families studied were still withdrawn from community activities 20 years after their initial job loss.

With long-term unemployment at its highest rates since after the Great Depression, such withdrawal was worrisome for the future of American communities and gave economists, social scientists, psychologists, and other experts much to ponder about the large-scale effects of the Great Recession. In the following perspective, Gregory Rodriguez details the multifaceted ways in which the Great Recession threatened American life and the existence of the American Dream.

Gregory Rodriguez, "The American Dream: Is It Slipping Away?" *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2010.
<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/sep/27/opinion/la-oe-rodriguez-dream-20100927>

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions

1. In your opinion, is it important whether people believe in the American Dream? Why or why not?
2. What does society have to gain by promoting the American Dream? What does it have to lose by letting it slip away?
3. What is the definition of the American Dream, circa 2012? How does this compare with the American Dream in the 1930s? The 1960s? The 1980s? (*continued*)

Using the Sociological Lens: The Great Recession and the American Dream (*continued*)

Both Zogby and Rodriguez consider the long-term effects of the Great Recession but come to different conclusions about whether it will permanently diminish the American Dream. Given what you know on the topic, what might Americans do as a whole to preserve the American Dream? Is it worth preserving? Which do you think is correct, and why? Which pieces of evidence swayed you?

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Summary & Conclusion

The study of sociology provides powerful tools to help us understand and influence the world around us. Sociology trains us to develop a sociological imagination and to view the world through a sociological lens. These tools help us connect the experiences of single individuals to the social patterns that occur in society as a whole.

By applying four criteria, we can determine if an issue is defined as a social problem:

1. Is the issue part of a social pattern?
2. Does the issue violate the core values of a society?
3. Does the issue negatively impact those in power? Do those in power consider the social pattern problematic?
4. Is the issue socially created? Can society do something to change it?

Sociologists speak of social problems as being socially constructed, meaning that the needs, values, interests, and behaviors of a society create and shape them. When we see social problems through the broader viewpoint of the sociological lens, we also widen our perspective of how those problems can be remedied.

Sociologists can make use of different types of data collection methods (quantitative and qualitative) to detect, measure, and analyze social patterns. Different ways of viewing the underlying causes of social problems, called theoretical perspectives, guide which research methods sociologists use and how they make sense of the data. There are five major theoretical perspectives in sociology:

- The conflict perspective
- The functionalist perspective
- The symbolic interactionist perspective
- The race-centered perspective
- The feminist perspective

Using sociological tools, sociologists can notice social patterns, understand why they are occurring, and determine steps that will help to mitigate social problems, making a positive impact on society.

Key Terms

applied sociologists Sociologists who use research findings to make an impact on an organization, larger society, or both. Many are hired by organizations to find ways to help the organizations become more effective.

colorblindness The notion that if individuals within a society act as though race does not matter, then it won't.

conflict theory Sociological theory that maintains that society is made up of groups competing for power. This theory focuses on the importance of economic systems and suggests that those who control the economic institution also control the other institutions in society.

critical race theorist Race-centered sociological theorist who maintains an interdisciplinary perspective to examine issues of racial inequality and to advocate for racial justice.

external inequality Social inequality forced upon an individual by societal factors such as a lack of access to education, health care, housing, and other resources.

feminist theory Sociological theory used to explain the social processes that have created and continue to perpetuate gender inequality.

functionalist perspective A sociological theory that maintains that society is made up of interdependent parts, each working for the good of the whole in order to ensure the proper functioning of various social institutions.

internal inequality Social inequality caused by an individual's innate talents and contributions to society.

life chances An individual's opportunities to succeed in life, influenced by social factors such as gender, race, economic status, and education.

norms Clear guidelines for behavior and interaction, created and regulated by society.

public sociologists Sociologists who make their research findings “public,” or presented in a way that is accessible and comprehensive to the public.

race-centered theory Sociological theory that focuses on how and why racial hierarchies influence society and help to perpetuate racial divisions and inequality.

situated vantage point An individual’s view of the world based on his or her social standing in society.

social construction Something created by a society and its members by way of the many complex choices they make and shaped by the needs, values, interests, and behaviors of a society.

social institutions Systems and structures supported by custom and laws that help carry out tasks for society and shape the activities of groups and individuals.

social pattern A repeated set of characteristics, behaviors, or events associated with a social institution or influence.

social problem An issue produced by conditions in society that must be changed for the good of society. An issue must meet four criteria to be considered a social problem: (1) it must be part of a social pattern; (2) it must violate a core value of society; (3) it must negatively impact those in power; and (4) it must be socially created such that society can change it.

social stratification Ranking of groups within society into levels based on their access to and possession of what is most valued in society, such as money, power, or prestige.

sociological lens A way of viewing the world that can be used to reveal how individuals’ decisions and experiences are related to social trends. Allows sociologists to distinguish “personal troubles” from “public issues” and to identify social patterns.

symbolic interactionist theory Sociological theory that maintains that society is a social construct, continually created and recreated by humans’ interactions with one another.

value Something deemed important by a culture or an individual.

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions

1. Why does access to education, stable family environment, and adequate funding so profoundly affect life chances? Consider the examples of Grace and Elizabeth in the introduction to this chapter.
2. In what ways might climate change be categorized as a social problem? What is the counterargument to these claims? Do you think climate change is a social issue? Why or why not?
3. Why might the personal issue of depression be considered a social problem? Consider societal factors that contribute to people suffering from depression.

