As you probably discovered in part 1, exploring a new discipline involves learning a great deal of new vocabulary. This is because each discipline stakes out and defines its basic subject matter. In an introductory biology course, for example, one of the first things you learn is how biologists distinguish between what is "living" and what is "not living," since biology, as a discipline, focuses on those things that have the quality of being alive.

In part 1 we defined sociology by its attention to social life and behavior, especially in relation to social systems and their cultural, structural, population, and ecological characteristics. It is impossible to think sociologically without including one or more of these concepts. By now, for example, you might be more aware that your family can be thought of as a social system with its own characteristics—values and norms, role and power structures, size, or how it uses physical space. Like the concept of living things to a biologist, concepts such as "value," "structure," and "role" are sociologically important because they make us more aware of aspects of reality, focusing our attention in a new way and providing the basis for a new way of thinking.

This is only the beginning, however, for a simple awareness of various aspects of social life is not enough. The whole point of *observing* the world in a new way is to *think* about it in a new way in order to understand more about how social life works (see Collins 1989). Once we learn how to observe families and describe their characteristics, for example, we can ask basic questions about them such as the questions outlined at the end of chapter 1. How are families organized, and what kinds of consequences does this produce? How do they change? What is the relationship between families as social systems and the people who participate in them?

Whatever questions we ask about social life, the answers must include explanations. For this we must understand something about sociological theory and the major perspectives that underlie them.

Overview

In part 1 we looked at the kinds of things sociologists pay attention to and general kinds of questions they ask. This chapter takes this a step further by focusing on choosing a point of view from which to observe social life (theoretical perspectives) and then explaining what we observe (theory). The next several sections discuss what theoretical perspectives are and where they come from, including the historical origins of sociology itself as a perspective on human experience.

THEORY AND THE PROBLEM OF KNOWING

A **theory** is a set of interrelated ideas used to explain how things work. As we will see in chapter 13, for example, theories of racism include ideas about how prejudice develops between people in different racial categories. Three examples of such theories are the following. First, when people compete for resources such as jobs or land, they tend to develop prejudiced ideas about one another. Second, when one group dominates and exploits another, it tends to develop prejudices about the subordinate group to justify what would otherwise be perceived as injustice. Many slaveholders in the South, for example, saw themselves as Christians and tried to reconcile oppression of blacks with their Christian beliefs and values.

This engraving illustrates a riot against Chinese immigrants, who were perceived by many low-status whites as unfair competitors for jobs. Racial stereotypes and scapegoating often serve as ideological "justifications" for abuse of minorities.

Third, the less experience we have with different kinds of people, the more likely we are to rely on stereotypes about them, including those involved in racial prejudice (see Case, Greeley, and Fuchs 1989). Residential and school segregation, for example, contribute to racism by preventing direct exposure to racial and cultural diversity. Integration tends to decrease prejudice by increasing people's knowledge based on actual experience of individuals rather than stereotypes. This helps explain stereotyping and prejudice within societies and from one society to another. Most Japanese have no direct experience with blacks, for example, just as most people in the United States have no experience with Japanese. As a result, regarding outsider groups with whom they have little experience, people rely on stereotypes.

Notice that what makes each of these approaches to racism *theories* is that they try to *explain* what it is about social systems that creates and promotes racism as part of social life. When systems are organized around competition among groups, when one group is in a position to dominate and exploit another, and when there are few opportunities to get to know people as individuals, then prejudice and stereotypes, including those associated with racism, are likely results. We can see these factors, then, as *causes* of racism, social conditions that increase the chances that racism will develop.

People often perceive theoretical thinking as a lofty activity engaged in only by philosophers or scientists. In fact, however, everyone who has ideas about how things work is thinking theoretically. If you ask people why minorities are so badly off, for example, most people will offer an explanation. There are, of course, differences between the theorizing that most people do and formulating sociological theory. As we will see in the next chapter, sociologists try to construct theories that can be tested to see if they are supported

by evidence—something most people do not bother with. Sociologists also pay more attention to whether a theory is constructed in a logical way, and examine the assumptions and values that underlie our theories.

Values and Assumptions

We all make assumptions about the world in order to think about it. In the simplest sense, we assume that what we see is real and that we understand people when they talk to us. We also may make assumptions about human nature and social life—that the distribution of wealth is fair or unfair, or that people are or are not responsible for what happens to them. These kinds of ideas are assumptions in that we rarely test them to find out if they are true. They are important because they influence what we pay attention to and how we interpret what we observe. If we assume that the state exists to maintain social harmony and serve the best interests of everyone, for example, we might not ask how the power of the state can be used to further the interests of the wealthy at the expense of everyone else.

Values are important because they influence what we try to understand. If we choose to research the effects of pornography on the level of violence against women, for example, rather than research how leaders emerge in urban gangs or why divorce rates go up or down, we are making a value decision about what we think is interesting or important.

Since assumptions and values are ideas, and since ideas are part of culture, it follows that how we pay attention to the world and try to explain it are affected by culture (see One Step Further 5.1). But our thinking is also affected by the social conditions and historical framework in which we live. Eighteenth-century scientists, for example, never pondered the dangers of nuclear power plants, not because of their values or assumptions but because nuclear power plants did not exist. Explaining rapid social change was not a theoretical problem for medieval scholars because the pace of change was not rapid at all. If today many sociologists are drawn to questions about racism, urban living, poverty, war and peace, and rapid technological change, it is in large part because these phenomena exist in a way that they did not in other societies at other times.

Theoretical thinking, then, is profoundly affected by the kinds of social systems in which people live, and sociological theory is no exception. As the following section shows, to understand where sociological thinking came from, we must look at the social conditions of Europe in the nineteenth century—a time of rapid, often chaotic change and some new ways of thinking.

How Sociology Developed as a Way of Thinking

We can trace the roots of sociology to Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century, when its development was spurred by three major social forces and conditions. The first was a general philosophy that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century. It assumed that understanding based on reason and experience would make it possible to solve social problems and improve society, in the process promoting human rights and freedom from oppression. A major part of this view was a preference for science over religion as a way of explaining reality. Science offered new methods of observation and explanation and rested on the idea that the physical world could be controlled. In applying the scientific approach to societies, the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) argued that social life was governed by laws that could be discovered by a new science that he was the first to call "sociology" (Comte [1854] 1898).

ONE STEP FURTHER 5.1

Assumptions, Values, and Research on Social Inequality

One of the most important ways assumptions and values affect how we think is by influencing the kinds of questions we ask. In trying to understand social inequality, for example, sociologists ask some kinds of questions more than others. As table A shows, between 1965 and 1975 most research articles in mainstream sociological journals focused on individual characteristics of the poor (59 percent) and poverty programs (28 percent), while a small portion focused on the economic and political causes of poverty (10 percent) or the extent of poverty (2 percent). Notice, also, that studies of individual characteristics and poverty programs received 94 percent (55 percent plus 39 percent) of all government funding on poverty research.

By asking how the characteristics of poor people cause and perpetuate poverty, we ignore the characteristics of social systems and how these promote poverty and wealth. This tendency reflects the cultural assumption that individuals, and not social systems, are the primary cause of social problems. In doing so, it helps to perpetuate the status quo by directing critical attention away from underlying social conditions.

TABLE A Research Articles on Poverty, by Focus and by Extent of Government Funding

ARTICLE'S FOCUS*	PERCENTAGE OF ALL POVERTY ARTICLES	PERCENTAGE OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING
Amount of poverty	2	0
Individual characteristics of poor people	59	55
Political or economic causes of poverty	10	6
Poverty programs	28	39
Other	1	0
TOTAL	100	100

*Articles published between 1965 and 1975 in *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Problems*, *Social Forces*, and *Sociological Quarterly*.

A second factor contributing to the emergence of sociological thinking was the existence of widespread social upheaval throughout most of Europe. The French Revolution toppled the monarchy in 1789, and Napoléon Bonaparte plunged the Continent into war in an unsuccessful attempt to conquer Europe. At the same time, capitalism was growing rapidly as the Industrial Revolution brought unprecedented productivity and technological change, but also rapidly growing and congested cities, high unemployment, increased poverty, miserable living conditions for great masses of people, and political instability. These rapid social changes prompted some to search for new ways of understanding social life.

Comte responded by searching for scientific principles that might explain what was going on. Other early sociologists such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber relied less heavily on the belief in scientific laws, but also wrestled with fundamental questions about a world that seemed to be moving in a dangerous direction. How were order, social cohesion, and morality possible in human societies? What were the causes of social oppression, injustice, and inequality? How was the distribution of power changing, and how would this affect the way societies were organized and the degree of control people had over their lives?

A third factor in the emergence of sociology was utilitarianism, a popular way of thinking that early sociologists reacted against. Utilitarianism is based on the assumption that humans behave rationally and that social life results solely from the rational choices made by individuals. From this perspective, social systems result from the calculated decisions of individuals, and nothing of importance exists beyond the limits of the individual psyche. By rejecting this view as too narrow, sociology developed as a way of understanding social life as more than a collection of individual lives. Instead, individual lives are seen as

taking place in relation to social systems. This view is based on the belief that societies are more than the sum of their parts; they are entities in themselves whose characteristics must be included in any full understanding of social life.

From its beginnings in the nineteenth century to today, sociological thinking has been influenced by the social conditions in which sociologists have lived and worked. To understand this is to understand how assumptions and values influence the choices sociologists have made about what kinds of questions to ask and how to go about answering them.

Overview

Sociology as a Product of Its Times

The rise of scientific thinking in nineteenth-century Europe

The need to explain social upheaval, revolution, and rapid social change

The inadequacy of utilitarianism and psychology as ways of understanding societies and social life

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Because assumptions and values have such a great influence on the theories people come up with, it is important not to let them stay in the background to be discovered by accident, if at all. Sociologists try to be clear about what their assumptions are and to organize these into explicit frameworks. In the simplest sense, for example, sociologists assume that social systems actually exist and shape social life through culture, social structure, population, and ecology. We ask all kinds of questions about social systems and the consequences they produce, but we rarely, if ever, seriously question our assumption that systems, culture, and social structure even exist in the first place.

A **theoretical perspective** is a set of assumptions that defines an approach to understanding something. Theoretical perspectives are necessary because they define our point of view by spelling out what to pay attention to, what kinds of things to explain, and how to go about explaining them. Unlike a theory, a theoretical perspective does not explain anything. Instead, it contains assumptions *about* what we are trying to explain. In chapter 1, for example, we discussed the problem of explaining suicide. Biologists, psychologists, and sociologists ask different questions about suicide because they approach problems from different points of view. This is also often true *within* disciplines: Just as sociology and biology differ, sociology includes perspectives that draw attention to and emphasize different aspects of the same social phenomenon. All sociologists consider some aspects of social systems and people's relation to them in trying to understand suicide; but what aspects they try to explain and how they go about that will vary according to the theoretical perspective they use.

In the following sections we will look at the three most important theoretical perspectives in sociology—functionalist, conflict, and interactionist. Each reflects not only different assumptions about social life, but different choices about which aspects of it are most important to pay attention to and understand.

Overview

The following sections introduce three major theoretical perspectives within sociology, all of which focus on one or more of the basic kinds of questions sociologists ask. As you read, be on the lookout for key elements of sociological thinking, including attention to social systems, their characteristics and consequences, and what they have to do with individuals.

The Functionalist Perspective

The great French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) objected to the utilitarian idea that a society can be understood simply by paying attention to individuals' motives and behavior. He was reacting in part to the growing influence of psychological thinking. In developing what became the **functionalist perspective,** Durkheim argued that social systems are entities in and of themselves that can be understood as more than the sum of the various parts that make them up, including the people who participate in them.

PUZZLE

IS WAR ALL HELL?

"War is hell," declared the U.S. Civil War Union general William Tecumseh Sherman. Everyone can think of lots of bad consequences of war, but we may be less aware of how war produces consequences that are valued in social systems. War often stimulates economic production, for example, and creates jobs in the process. In addition, it tends to increase feelings of pride, unity, and solidarity among citizens.

Understanding these kinds of unanticipated consequences of social life is an important focus of sociological thinking.

Like Comte, he borrowed from the rapidly emerging field of biology, in particular the concept of an organism whose various parts are related in ways that enable it to function. Like a biological organism, he argued, societies are wholes whose parts have little significance *except in relation to one another and the whole* (Durkheim [1893] 1933). As an organism, a human being is a collection not simply of parts—muscle tissue, organs, and bones—but of parts that are functionally *related* to one another in particular ways. It is this set of relationships, and not merely the collection of parts, that makes humans what they are. In addition, like organisms, social systems have certain requirements—they need to adapt to a changing environment, to have a certain level of stability and cohesion among their parts, to establish and achieve various goals, and so on (see Parsons 1951). Today, sociologists no longer use the organism model, because in too many ways it does not fit reality. Unlike organisms, for example, societies often include diverse interests and oppression and conflict among their various parts. This does not, however, detract from Durkheim's basic insight into social life, for unlike some of his contemporaries he used the organic analogy only in a limited sense.

Sociologists who use the functionalist perspective emphasize the importance of (1) how social systems operate (or "function"), (2) how they change and remain stable, (3) how they produce consequences, and (4) how consequences support or interfere with system requirements or cultural values. A consequence is **functional** if it contributes to one or more requirements or values, and is **dysfunctional** if it interferes with those (Merton 1968).

In the U.S. legal system, for example, people accused of crimes are protected by rights designed to make it difficult to convict and punish people unjustly, such as rights to legal counsel, trial by jury, and rules of evidence that prohibit practices such as torturing people in order to force confessions. These help to protect people from abuse and are functional for a system designed, in part, to promote the value of justice. However, they also make it easier for guilty people to go free, as when murderers are released because arresting officers fail to inform them of their legal rights or seize evidence without a proper search warrant. These norms, then, have both functional and dysfunctional consequences for the criminal justice system and the society of which it is a part.

When functional or dysfunctional consequences are intended, they are **manifest;** and when they are unintended, they are **latent** (Merton 1968). The norms that protect accused criminals have the manifest consequence of upholding civil rights; but they can also have the latent consequence of interfering with the effective prosecution of criminals. In constructing such protection, no one intended to make it easier for criminals to go free, and yet this is a real consequence produced by the criminal justice system.

Durkheim was particularly interested in latent consequences. People of his time (like people today), for example, typically viewed crime as something abnormal caused primarily by personality defects. Durkheim ([1895] 1938), however, saw it as a normal part of social life. When a society defines behavior such as child abuse as criminal, it helps define its structural boundaries by distinguishing between insiders who obey the law and outsiders who do not. As a result, those who obey the law will tend to feel closer to one another *simply because they abide by common laws* in contrast to those who do not. Since these kinds of feelings help to hold communities together, the act of defining certain behaviors as crimes has a latent functional consequence of increasing social cohesion. Crime can also be functional by bringing about needed social change. Rioting and civil disobedience in the United States during the 1960s, for example, heightened national awareness of racism (see Kerner Commission 1968; McAdam 1982). The 1992 Los Angeles riots protesting the acquittal of police officers accused of beating black suspect Rodney King had similar consequences.

The expression of community support and cohesion that typically appears following the murder of police officers is a latent functional consequence of crime.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the functionalist perspective is that it raises questions about social systems and the relationship between their characteristics and the social consequences they produce (see Durkheim [1895] 1938, [1924] 1974). If, for example, a society has the technology to produce an abundance of goods, and if its culture includes the idea that people can and should accumulate property, this makes it more likely that social inequality and oppression will emerge. In this sense, although it is individuals who are either poor or wealthy, it is societies that produce social conditions in which such extremes are possible and encouraged by being defined as socially desirable. Without norms and values that support the ideas of private property and inheritance, great wealth—and, therefore, great poverty—would be far less likely to occur. We can see, then, how cultural and ecological characteristics of a society can be linked to particular consequences such as social inequality and oppression.

The functionalist perspective also helps to explain why it is so difficult to alleviate social problems such as poverty in spite of the many negative effects they have on human life. As Gans (1971, 1987) argued, poverty persists in part because it contributes to the operation of many societies as social systems—in other words, because of its functional consequences. The existence of poverty is one way to ensure that the "dirty work" that no one wants to do will indeed get done, from the backbreaking labor of picking vegetables by hand to cleaning public toilets. It ensures this by providing a large number of people whose circumstances are so desperate that they cannot afford to turn down a job simply because the work is degrading or poorly paid or dangerous. Without poverty, for example, it would be much more difficult to maintain an all-volunteer army, because recruits are drawn heavily from those with poor job prospects in the civilian labor market.

It is important to remember that the concepts "functional" and "dysfunctional" are not simply formal ways of saying "good" and "bad" in a moral or ethical sense. How we judge the consequences produced by a social system is of course important; but it is a separate issue from determining whether something has functional or dysfunctional consequences for that system. Slavery, for example, was functional for the plantation system of the South prior to the Civil War, but this hardly means that slavery was either desirable or necessary. Gans (1971) makes similar points about the functional consequences of poverty. That poverty

Overview

Fundamentals of the Functionalist Perspective

Emphasis on social systems, how they operate as a whole and balance tendencies toward change and stability (Durkheim)

Evaluation of consequences produced by social systems
- as functional or dysfunctional
- as manifest or latent
- in relation to system values

is associated with a variety of functional consequences for social systems does not imply that poverty should or must exist. As he argues, there are alternative ways of achieving the same goals, such as by paying people enough so that they would be willing to perform disagreeable jobs. These alternatives are resisted because they would require other changes such as raising the cost of getting this work done. In other words, the fact that poverty is associated with functional as well as dysfunctional consequences makes it all the more difficult to eradicate.

The basic insight of the functionalist perspective is that a complete understanding of any aspect of social life must include its relation to social systems and their characteristics. In this sense, poverty as a social problem involves far more than the distribution of income and wealth among individuals or the many factors in people's individual lives that affect it, such as education, motivation, or luck. It is also a *social* problem produced by social systems.

The Conflict Perspective

Like the functionalist perspective, the **conflict perspective** focuses on how social systems operate, but it emphasizes how they promote division, inequality, and struggle. It is based on the insight that control over social systems is usually distributed unevenly and that those who have greater control can use it to benefit themselves at the expense of others. As such, the conflict perspective is concerned primarily not with social systems as a whole, but with how the consequences of social life are distributed unevenly among the people who participate in them. In the United States, for instance, generally, whites are more powerful and wealthy than nonwhites, men are more powerful and wealthy than women, and those who own or control factories and other means of production are more wealthy and powerful than the vast majority of the population who work for wages.

The conflict perspective asks questions about how division, inequality, and struggle arise, from relationships between husbands and wives to those between rich and poor nations. What are the consequences of inequality for the quality of people's lives? How are the family, religion, schools, the mass media, and the state used to control subordinate groups and keep them in their place? How is it possible to lessen the degree of inequality and end social oppression?

Origins of the Conflict Perspective The conflict perspective originated primarily in the work of Karl Marx (1818–83) and, to a lesser extent, Max Weber (1864–1920), who felt compelled to understand a world that was not only changing rapidly, but raising serious threats to social justice and the quality of life. After the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte, for example, Marx and many other Germans anticipated a new era of freedom but soon found themselves in a police state that was worse than life under Napoleon. Political meetings were banned, universities were tightly controlled, and there was no representative government, trial by jury, or right of free speech. Widespread expectations of liberty were frustrated by the power of an elite to oppress and exploit the masses of people.

Unable to find a position in universities, Marx spent the early part of his working life as a journalist in Germany and France. His critical analyses of the plight of the lower classes made him unpopular with the authorities and he eventually moved to England. There the Industrial Revolution was in full swing and the lot of workers was growing steadily worse as control over production became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a capitalist elite. Marx spent the rest of his life studying economic history and theory, and writing about industrial capitalism and its effects on the human condition. In his work, he developed the view that the production of goods is the most important thing humans do, and that the way a society organizes and controls productive work affects every aspect of social life.

In capitalist societies, the means of production—such as machines and factories—can be privately owned by people who hire others to produce goods in return for wages. Marx ([1867] 1975) argued that these simple aspects of the productive process—wage labor and private ownership of capital—affect virtually every area of social life. In particular, they create class divisions between people who own property and those who work for wages, because employers will try to increase their profits by paying workers as little as possible. This kind of system creates class conflict that, Marx believed, eventually would lead to revolutionary social change (see Marx and Engels [1846] 1976, [1848] 1932).

Marx also argued that such divisions are reflected in major social institutions whose survival depends on adapting themselves to the prevailing economic system. The state, for example, supports a society's basic economic values. It will defend private property rights in capitalist societies or, in the case of state socialism in China, defend the state's right to decide economic policy and enforce laws that subordinate the interests of individuals to the larger goals of the nation as a whole. Other institutions—schools, the media, religion, and so on—fall in line by not criticizing the economic system and, if only by their silence, promote the idea that the economic system is legitimate and not in need of basic change.

Marx approached these kinds of problems in a sociological way, for he looked not at the private motivations of individuals, but at how social systems make people more likely to behave in some ways than in others (see Marx [1859] 1970). Capitalists, for example, often make decisions—such as to close a factory or lay off workers—that have cruel consequences for workers and their families. Marx argued that the cause of such behavior is not that employers are cruel, but that they participate in a social system that makes it difficult for them to do otherwise and still maintain their elite position. In a capitalist system, firms must compete successfully to survive, and a major factor in this is the ability to maximize profit by minimizing costs, including the cost of labor. This means that in order to succeed, employers must to some degree exploit their workers—by paying them as little as possible, by laying them off in order to protect company profits, or by moving operations to other regions or countries where workers will work for less. The problem, argued Marx, is not employers but capitalism itself as an economic system.

Using the Conflict Perspective The conflict perspective is not limited to Marx's analysis of social inequality, although this has been the most influential and widely used example. Like Marx, Max Weber was also concerned with social change that accompanied industrial capitalism, but his approach was broader than Marx's. Weber believed that inequality and conflict have a much broader social basis than economic relationships and control over production, including people's ideas about prestige and the distribution of power and authority in organizations such as corporations and government. He saw bureaucracy as a pervasive form of social organization that is ideally suited to enforcing ever greater degrees of inequality and oppression. He believed it also threatens to make social life increasingly impersonal and subject to external control and manipulation (Weber [1922] 1958).

Since the early work of Marx and Weber, the conflict perspective has developed a general concern with the ways in which division, inequality, and struggle develop in all kinds of social systems (see Collins 1975; Dahrendorf 1959; Mills 1956). Wallerstein's world systems theory, for example, uses a conflict approach to explain relations among rich and poor nations and the inability of Third World countries to improve their standards of living (Wallerstein 1976a, 1980, 1989). He focuses on the fact that the world economic system is dominated by wealthy industrial nations that can exploit poorer nations by preventing them from developing an independent industrial base and making

George Tooker's Government Bureau *powerfully evokes a nightmarish vision of life in a society ruled by anonymous, faceless bureaucrats.*

them politically and economically dependent. World systems theory raises many questions about how this happens, about why poor nations grow poorer while wealthy nations grow wealthier, about who benefits most from foreign investment in poor nations, and about whose interests are served by political oppression in Third World countries.

In its most general sense, the conflict perspective serves as a useful reminder that the potential for struggle and conflict is built into the organization of most social systems, whether families or nations. All that is necessary to turn that potential into reality are the right conditions. When the former Soviet Union suddenly came apart only a few years ago, for example, what the world witnessed was only the dramatic culmination of an underlying social process that had been going on for a long time. It was a process based on fundamental stresses and strains within the society itself—the conflict between an authoritarian government power structure, for example, and the people's desire for freedom and autonomy; or the clash between a population with money to spend and material needs to fill and an economic system that literally could not deliver the goods. In similar ways, the civil war that has devastated the former Yugoslavia resulted in part from long-standing ethnic division and conflict that for a while had been muted by the authoritarian government's ability to control the population and maintain some sense of national unity. When revolution overthrew the government, however, that control and unity crumbled with it, and old hostilities emerged with stunning violence and brutality.

Together, the conflict and functionalist perspectives focus on how social systems operate and the kinds of consequences they produce. Both, however, tend not to deal with what engages people most directly—how we participate in social life and how this affects our experience and behavior. For this we must turn to the interactionist perspective.

Overview

Fundamentals of the Conflict Perspective

Emphasis on inequality, division, and struggle as consequences produced by social systems

Major examples:

- Marx's theories of class
- Weber's theories of bureaucracy and oppression
- Wallerstein's world systems theory

The Interactionist Perspective

The **interactionist perspective** focuses on people's actual experience and behavior in everyday life and the relation of these to how they perceive, interpret, and feel about themselves and others (see Adler, Adler, and Fontana 1987). In

contrast to the conflict and functionalist perspectives, the interactionist focus is less concerned with the relatively large-scale characteristics of social systems than with individuals acting in relation to one another.

The interactionist perspective began with the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) and most importantly the American social philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Mead focused on the role of symbols in the relationship between individuals and societies (for this reason, many interactionists who follow in Mead's tradition refer to their approach as **symbolic interactionism**) (see Blumer 1969; Mead 1934).

From an interactionist perspective, we cannot understand social life without paying attention to how we attach meaning to our experience and behavior. To explain why people behave as they do, we must have some idea of what they believe and value, and what they think others expect of them—and these will vary from one social situation to another. When we enter a new situation we must identify the **definition of the situation,** which is to say that we have to identify the social system we are in and our position in it (McHugh 1968). As part of this, we must figure out what beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes apply to us and other people in this situation, as well as such structural factors as the power and communication structures. This is the only way that we can distinguish one situation from another—a visit to a doctor's office, for example, from attendance at a wedding, or watching a football game from witnessing gang warfare.

We identify the definition of the situation by interpreting its various aspects, from people's behavior and appearance to the physical characteristics of a particular setting. As a social situation, for example, a wedding is defined by such things as clothing (formal wear like tuxedos and wedding dresses), particular arrangements of people (bride, groom, best man, maid of honor, religious figure or city official, etc.), music (the bridal march), and various aspects of material culture (wedding rings, bridal bouquets, cars with tin cans and shoes tied to the rear bumper, rice being tossed through the air, and so on). Taken together, these allow us to identify the situation and locate ourselves and other people in relation to it and the expectations associated with it.

All of the various aspects that define a situation, of course, can vary from one society to another or within societies from one subculture to another. A tourist in New Orleans, for example, who comes upon a parade of jazz musicians and people who seem to be celebrating something might never identify the situation as a traditional black funeral. Definitions of the situation, however, also vary in another way. In some ways, social life is like a game in which we are players who follow rules that define our relations with one another as well as what the game is about (Mead 1934). Unlike in most games, however, the rules and understandings of social life are open to negotiation and interpretation, and symbols play an important part in that process.

A date, for example, is a situation that tends to follow patterns in a particular culture, but people can appear and behave in many ways, each of which can have more than one interpretation. When a man opens a door for a woman or insists on driving the car or paying the check, his behavior can be interpreted as politeness and a show of respect or as an assertion of dominance based on the belief that men are strong and women are weak and need protection. When someone acts friendly on a date, this may or may not mean he or she is interested in having sex. Gutek (1985) shows that, among heterosexuals, how such behavior is interpreted depends on whether the person acting friendly is a man or a woman. Men more than women tend to interpret friendly gestures as having sexual significance and intentions (see also Abbey 1987). Similarly, men are more likely than women to interpret their date's saying no to sex as a maybe or even a yes. The symbolic interaction perspective identifies such details of social life that we encounter as we move through the world in a continuing process of using, interpreting, and responding to symbols.

The widespread use of ritual masks in most cultures dramatizes how we use our faces to present ourselves in different ways to the world, but usually not with conscious intent, as in this turtle shell mask from New Guinea.

Life as Theater To sociologist Erving Goffman, there is something very theatrical about social life (which is why his approach to symbolic interaction is often referred to as the **dramaturgical perspective;** see Goffman 1959, 1967, 1981). As William Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It,*

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts

As actors and actresses, we present images of ourselves to audiences and construct images of others by watching their performances. To Goffman, we are always acting, trying to create favorable impressions from one stage and audience to the next as we perform various roles. We might be confident and aggressive while playing a sport, but meek when a police officer hands us a traffic ticket; wild and crazy at a party, but serious and calm at a funeral. None of this is faking; there is no "real self" deceiving the world. From Goffman's point of view, this is just the way it is: We are who we present ourselves to be. The masks do not hide us; they are all parts of us and reveal different aspects of who we are to different people in different situations. The members of each audience, in turn, are also actors who use us as an audience, and so each performance is tied to and dependent on the performances of others, and in this way our otherwise separate lives overlap with and touch one another.

That all of this takes place within social systems raises a key question in the interactionist perspective: How do we view the relationship between social systems and individuals (see Lyman and Vidich 1988; Meltzer and Petras 1970)?

Individuals and Social Systems Some interactionists, such as Manford Kuhn, argue that social systems and social life consist primarily of networks of statuses

and roles (see Kuhn 1964). These are external to individuals and produce patterns of thought, feeling, experience, and behavior. A basketball team, for example, can be thought of as a network of players, coaches, and managers and the roles they are expected to perform. When people join a team, they perceive the team as something external to them, larger than themselves and to which they belong. They are affected by the characteristics of that system—such as a structure that gives more power to coaches than to players—and this produces patterns of behavior associated with the system known as a basketball team.

Interactionists such as Simmel ([1902] 1950) and Herbert Blumer (1969) offer a very different view. They argue that social systems are just abstractions that do not exist as something external to the people who participate in them. "Society," wrote Simmel, "is merely the name for a number of individuals, connected by interaction" ([1902] 1950, p. 10). From this perspective, social systems exist in a concrete way only when people actually *do* something. We can think of a college classroom as a social system, for example, but it is just an idea in our minds until the students and professor go into a classroom and begin to talk and interact. At that moment they literally re-create the system known as a college classroom. As they proceed, that system continues to exist through their behavior until they leave and go on to re-create *other* social systems—a dining hall, family gathering, workplace, library reserve room, and so on.

Blumer argues that a great deal of what people do cannot be predicted merely by knowing which roles are involved. Much of our behavior is not defined as a clear role expectation, and even when we do conform to the expectations associated with a role, we often improvise as we go along. There are patterns of behavior that we can expect to see in any college classroom, for example, but there is a lot of variation around it. The language people actually use, their gestures, how they respond to one another, whether they laugh or express anger—all of these details are improvised by the participants. By acknowledging this, Blumer is arguing for the importance of individual decisions and creativity in social interaction—that it is not social systems that make individuals, but the other way around.

As with many opposing arguments, the most useful position combines the best elements of the two extremes. Social systems would not exist without people to participate in them. It is also true, however, that we tend to experience systems as separate from us, with expectations that can override our individual wants, needs, and preferences. The actual words, tones of voice, facial expressions, and other gestures that students might use to answer a professor's question, for example, can take on any number of forms; but in a classroom, behavior is unlikely to include profanity, physical assault, shouting, undressing, sex, or topics defined as irrelevant. We do a great deal of improvising in social life, but we generally do not feel free to do whatever we want. That feeling of being limited by a situation is rooted in our perception of social systems as something real and external to us as individuals.

Ethnomethodology Since people will not feel limited by a social system unless they are aware on some level that it exists, there must be ways of reminding them of the situation they are in and the expectations that go with it. What distinguishes a classroom from a basketball game is the particular patterns of expectation about how people are supposed to appear and behave. In order for that system to operate, however, people have to share among themselves the idea that it exists at that moment. If two students begin tossing a basketball back and forth in class and taking shots at an imaginary basket on the wall, other people might remind them of what this situation is and is not. This can be accomplished in many ways, from people clearing their throats or staring to someone yelling, "Hey, cut it out!" Whatever the actual method, what is being accomplished is the reconstruction of a shared sense of what is going on.

Overview

Fundamentals of the Interactionist Perspective

Emphasis on the use of symbols and gestures to represent, interpret, and construct social reality, including ideas we have about ourselves

Major Ideas

- The importance of using symbols to interpret what people say and do (Mead)
- The dramaturgical approach (Goffman)
- Social systems as networks of statuses and roles that determine patterns of interaction (Kuhn)
- Social systems as existing only through people's interacting with one another (Simmel, Blumer)
- Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel)

Based on the work of the sociologist Harold Garfinkel, this approach to interaction is called **ethnomethodology,** which refers, literally, to the study of the methods that people ("ethno") use in everyday life (see Garfinkel 1967; Livingston 1987; Maynard and Clayman 1991). We use various methods to help us sustain a shared sense that the social relationships in which we participate are real. Conversations, for example, depend on various kinds of gestures to keep going. While one person is talking, the other typically nods and maintains eye contact and says things like "uh huh" every once in awhile as a way of sustaining the shared belief that a conversation is in fact taking place. Without the use of such methods, a conversation can rapidly fall apart ("Are you listening to me?").

Ritual has similar uses. With religious ritual people can come together and remind one another that they exist as a community of believers. When spouses kiss each other good-night before going to sleep, they are using ritual in subtle ways to reinforce a shared sense that their connection as spouses is real and enduring. Families have many such rituals, from how they celebrate holidays to eating meals together, that reinforce the social reality that they are, in fact, a family.

Such methods come into play even in situations that we might not at first think of as part of social systems. When people enter an elevator and one person faces the rear rather than the front, people are likely to react with a funny look, for example, or a smirk or a comment. All of these indicate that there is a social reality here with norms that are being violated. Most people do not think of being in an elevator as a social situation with a specific set of expectations; elevators are, instead, what people use to ride from one situation to another. It is most likely only when someone violates the expectations that we become aware of the social reality of elevator rides. It is people's reactions that are the "methods" that ethnomethodologists study, for it is these that help to sustain an ongoing sense of social reality.

Putting It All Together

The functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives touch on the most important aspects of sociological thinking, from the consequences of social systems to the intricacies of behavior. Although many sociologists have a favorite perspective, it is both possible and desirable to draw upon all three in a way that makes us more aware of the richness and complexity of social life.

Consider, for example, the social system known as a school. As recently as a century ago, schooling was not part of most people's lives, and yet now it is enormously important in industrial societies and, to a lesser but significant degree, in nonindustrial societies. How do we describe and explain what goes on in this kind of system? What kinds of questions do the different theoretical perspectives raise?

The functionalist perspective emphasizes the operation of schools as social systems that produce various kinds of consequences. Schools play an important part in the socialization process, from instilling a sense of patriotism to teaching basic skills to preparing advanced students for professional occupations. They provide a place for children to be while parents are at work, and keep millions of young people out of the labor market and, therefore, out of competition for jobs with adults. How well schools perform these functions has major effects on society, from the degree to which citizens are aware of world geography and the cultures of other societies to how well workers are prepared for a technologically sophisticated job market. The functionalist perspective raises questions about how schools produce consequences not only for schools but for other social systems to which they are connected, such as the family, economy, and political institutions.

The conflict perspective shifts the emphasis to issues about social inequality, division, and struggle. Since schools play a major role in socialization, including giving young people a sense of what they are most suited for in life, we must raise issues about the effect of schools on social inequality. In addition to producing educated adults able to perform adult roles, for example, schools also prepare people to accept and support basic aspects of their society, including an unequal distribution of wealth, power, and prestige.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue, for example, that the organization of U.S. high schools reflects the industrial capitalist economic system and helps reproduce the class system by preparing students from different social classes to know and accept their "place." Schools are arranged as hierarchies that encourage students to accept the idea of others having authority over them. Like most workers, students have little control over their work, but rather are told by someone in authority what to do as well as how and when to do it. Schools foster the belief that rewards are distributed according to merit and hard work, which legitimates inequality in society at large by encouraging students to blame themselves if they do not succeed as adults. In this way, argue Bowles and Gintis, schools play an important part in maintaining a system of social classes.

In contrast to the functionalist and conflict perspectives, the interactionist perspective focuses on the relationship between individuals and social systems and how people appear and behave in relation to one another. This raises very different types of sociological questions about schools. How are teachers' expectations of students affected by differences of race, class, and gender? Observations of classroom interaction find, for example, patterns that contribute to male dominance (see AAUW 1992; Sadker and Sadker 1994). Boys tend to receive more attention than girls, are allowed to dominate discussions, and are more likely to assert themselves by calling out answers while girls wait to be called upon by teachers. When girls speak in class, teachers are less likely to show support by looking at them, nodding, or verbally reinforcing what they are saying ("Yes, that's interesting," or even just an "uh huh"). Instead, they are more likely to not respond at all or to cut the student's response short and move on to another.

Social interaction in schools also reinforces class differences. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue, for example, that teachers reward working- and lower-class students for behaviors that will make them "good workers" as adults, such as punctuality, neatness, and obedience to authority. At the same time, middle- and upper-class students are rewarded for being independent, creative, and learning to exercise authority over others. In this way, patterns of interaction in schools help to reproduce the class system by shaping the personalities and expectations of students from different class backgrounds.

Although these three theoretical perspectives focus on different aspects of social life, they are all closely related to one another, for there is no question asked from one theoretical perspective that does not have the potential to involve the other two. The differences among the perspectives are those of emphasis, and the best sociological thinking is informed by an appreciation of all three. In fact, once you understand them, you may find the distinctions among them starting to fade in your mind as you blend basic elements of functionalist, conflict, and interactionist thinking.

We can see how this happens by returning to the problem of understanding racism. In the United States, racism is a set of cultural ideas that benefit whites by justifying the oppression and exploitation of blacks. Negative stereotypes about blacks, beliefs that white advantages result from superior personal characteristics such as intelligence, white hostility to the idea of integrated schools and neighborhoods—all of these are part of a pervasive ideology that helps keep the majority of blacks in a disadvantaged position.

Because racism plays an important part in how people see themselves and others, it also affects how they treat one another. A great deal of racism, for example, is acted out through language and gestures—from verbal insults to body postures, looks, and gestures that show deference or that assert contempt or superiority. A social system that includes racial oppression, in short, is made visible and real through the racist behavior of people in everyday life.

Racism also has consequences for social systems as a whole. In slave societies such as the South prior to the Civil War, it was a key part of a labor-intensive agrarian economic system. From this perspective, giving up racism would have made it extremely difficult to sustain crucial aspects of southern society. The challenge to slavery posed by the Civil War threatened not only the self-image and self-interest of slaveholders but what many southerners perceived as their entire way of life (see McPherson 1988). Today racism continues to have economic consequences by, for example, providing a pool of poor, unemployed workers who are available to perform disagreeable jobs for low wages (see Reich 1981, 1986).

If you study the last few paragraphs carefully, you can identify how the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives contribute to thinking about racism as a social phenomenon. In essence, the three major perspectives are simply ways of shedding light on the same thing from different angles. It is in developing this ability to draw upon different perspectives that the full potential of sociological thinking lies.

CONNECTIONS

In profound ways, sociological theory and theoretical perspectives shape the kinds of questions we ask, which in turn limits the kinds of things we can know.

As you review the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives, notice how the basic elements of the sociological framework appear over and over again throughout the chapter. Notice, for example, how functionalism pays attention to social systems, their cultural, structural, population, and ecological characteristics, and the consequences these produce for systems as a whole. Notice how the conflict perspective pays attention to similar elements, but from a point of view that emphasizes a different sort of social consequence—inequality, oppression, and struggle among various groups within systems. And notice how interactionism centers on key questions about the relationship between individuals and social systems and how they shape each other.

Be aware, then, of how the major sociological perspectives touch on all the elements of the sociological framework you studied in part 1. Together, they provide a rich and varied approach to understanding the complexities of social life.

SUMMARY

1. Although basic sociological concepts draw our attention to social life, theory is necessary to interpret and explain what we observe.
2. The most basic theoretical problems focus on understanding how social systems are organized, how they produce and distribute consequences, how they change, and how they are related to the lives of individuals.
3. Theories are specific explanations of how things work. Theoretical perspectives are general points of view whose assumptions define how to observe something, ask questions, and pursue answers.

4. Sociology emerged as a discipline in the nineteenth century. Contributing factors were the rise of modern science, uncertain and chaotic social conditions in Europe, and utilitarian thinking, to which sociology was in part a critical response.
5. The functionalist perspective is concerned primarily with how social systems operate as a whole and how their various characteristics produce consequences that interfere with or contribute to their ongoing existence as systems and the values on which they are based. These consequences may be functional or dysfunctional, manifest or latent.
6. The conflict perspective focuses on division, struggle, and inequality in social systems, how they develop and change, and how they affect social life, particularly by benefiting some at the expense of others.
7. The interactionist perspective focuses on the use of symbols, gestures, and behavior among people who participate in social systems. It includes questions about the use of language and interaction to create and sustain a sense of reality, including who we are in relation to others; the playing of roles; and the relationship between social systems as something external to individuals and the behavior of individuals as what makes social systems real.
8. Different theoretical perspectives generate different kinds of questions, and yet the fact that they are all fundamentally sociological means that the best sociological thinking depends on all three.

KEY TERMS

conflict perspective 90
definition of the situation 93
dramaturgical perspective 94
dysfunctional consequence 88
ethnomethodology 96
functional consequence 88
functionalist perspective 87
interactionist perspective 92
latent consequence 88
manifest consequence 88
symbolic interactionism 93
theoretical perspective 87
theory 83

LOOKING ELSEWHERE

Although you will encounter the basic sociological questions and the three major theoretical perspectives throughout *Human Arrangements*, many of the issues used to illustrate them are discussed in greater detail elsewhere. You might want to use the guide below to pursue some of these in greater depth. See, for example,

- how different disciplines might approach the problem of explaining suicide (chapter 1, pp. 6–9)
- bureaucracy (chapter 9, pp. 184–86)
- social inequality (chapters 12–15)
- the world economic system and international inequality (chapter 12, pp. 275–78)
- social movements and theories of social change (chapters 17 & 18)
- individuals and groups (chapter 9, pp. 196–98)
- social interaction (chapter 8)
- how we use language to create our idea of ourselves (chapter 7, pp. 131–32; 133–36)
- how the legal system works (chapter 11, pp. 235–39)
- capitalism (chapters 12 & 16)
- how schools, religion, and the state are used to perpetuate inequality (chapter 16, pp. 394–99)

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Coser, L. A. 1977. *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*. 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. A particularly clear and interesting look at the major thinkers who laid the theoretical groundwork for sociology. Especially well done is the placement of each thinker in the historical circumstances that gave rise to various approaches to understanding social life.

Hewitt, J. 1988. *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology*. 4th ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon. A rich source of examples of how interactionists make sense of the complexities of everyday life.

Livingston, E. 1987. *Making Sense of Ethnomethodology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. An authoritative text that helps make sense of what can be a difficult area of sociological thinking.

Merton, R. K. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure* (enlarged ed.). New York: Free Press. Perhaps the classic statement of the fundamentals of functional analysis.

Turner, J. H. 1991. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 5th ed. Chicago: Dorsey Press. A comprehensive critical overview of a wide variety of theoretical approaches in sociology.