THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

CHAPTER SUMMARY

• Sociology offers a perspective—a view of the world—that stresses the social experiences of people as the underlying cause of their behavior.

• Sociology emerged in the mid-1800s in Western Europe, during the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. Early sociologists who focused on the changes that were then occurring in Europe were Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber.

• In the early years, few women received the advanced education required to become a sociologist, and women like Harriet Martineau who did become sociologists were largely ignored.

• Sociology became established in North America by the end of the nineteenth century. Within U.S. sociology, there has always been a tension between basic sociology and attempts to reform society. Two early sociologists who combined sociology with social reform were Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois.

• A theory is a statement about how facts are related to one another. Because no one theory encompasses all of reality, sociologists use three primary theoretical frameworks: (1) symbolic interactionism—which concentrates on the meanings that underlie people’s lives—usually focuses on the micro level; (2) functional analysis—which stresses that society is made up of various parts that, when working properly, contribute to the stability of society—focuses on the macro level; and (3) conflict theory—which stresses inequalities and sees the basis of social life as a competitive struggle to gain control over scarce resources—also focuses on the macro level.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. The Sociological Perspective

A. This perspective is important because it provides a different way of looking at familiar worlds. It allows us to gain a new vision of social life.

B. This perspective stresses the broader social context of behavior by looking at individuals’ social location—employment, income, education, gender, age, and race—and by considering external influences—people’s experiences—which are internalized and become part of a person’s thinking and motivations. We are able to see the links between what people do and the social settings that shape their behavior.

C. This perspective enables us to analyze and understand both the forces that contribute to the emergence and growth of the global village and our unique experiences in our own smaller corners of this village.

II. The Origins of Sociology

A. Sociology emerged as a result of changes in European societies that were taking place at that time: (1) the Industrial Resolution, in which traditional society and culture were transformed; (2) the American and French revolutions, out of which new ideas about the rights of individuals within society were accepted; and (3) the application of scientific methods to find answers for questions about the natural order and our social world.

B. Auguste Comte coined the term sociology and suggested the use of positivism—applying the scientific approach to the social world—but he did not utilize this approach himself.

C. Herbert Spencer, another social philosopher, viewed societies as evolutionary, coined the term the survival of the fittest, and became known for social Darwinism.

D. Karl Marx, founder of the conflict perspective, believed that class conflict—the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—was the key to human history.
E. Emile Durkheim studied the social factors that underline suicide and found that the level of social integration, the degree to which people are tied to their social group, was a key social factor in suicide. Central to his studies was the idea that human behavior cannot be understood simply in individual terms but must be understood within the larger social context in which it occurs.

F. Max Weber defined religion as a central force in social change; for example, Protestantism encourages greater economic development and was the central factor in the rise of capitalism in some countries.

III. Sexism in Early Sociology

A. In the 1800s, women were assigned the roles of wife and mother. Few were able to acquire the education required to become sociologists, and those who did were ignored.

B. Harriet Martineau was exceptional. She studied social life in Great Britain and the United States and eventually published Society in America two to three decades before Max Weber or Emile Durkheim were even born.

IV. Sociology in North America

A. Sociology was transplanted to the United States in the late nineteenth century, first taking hold at the University of Chicago, the University of Kansas, and Atlanta University.

B. Jane Addams was active in promoting social reform. In 1889, she founded Hull House, a settlement house that served the needs of Chicago’s urban poor. Sociologists from the nearby University of Chicago were frequent visitors.

C. W. E. B. Du Bois was the first African American to earn a doctorate at Harvard University. He spent most of his career at Atlanta University, where he conducted extensive research on race relations in the United States. He was committed to social action, helping to found the NAACP.

D. During the 1940s, the focus shifted from reform to theory; Talcott Parsons developed abstract models of society to show how the parts of society harmoniously work together. In the 1950s, C. Wright Mills urged sociologists to get back to social reform. He saw imminent danger in the emergence of a power elite within the United States.

E. Recently, there have been attempts to blend sociological knowledge with practical results through the development of applied sociology.

1. Applied sociologists work in various social settings.

2. Applied sociology is not the same as social reform because the goal is not to rebuild society but to bring about change in a limited setting.

V. Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology

A. Theory is defined as a “general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work.” There are three major theoretical perspectives in sociology.

B. Symbolic interactionism views society as being composed of symbols that people use to establish meaning, define their relationship, develop their views of the world, and communicate with one another. A symbolic interactionist studying divorce would focus on the changing meanings of marriage, divorce, and family to explain the increase.

C. Functional analysis sees society as being composed of various parts, each with a function, which contributes to society’s equilibrium. Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim all contributed to the development of functionalism.
1. Robert Merton used the term functions to refer to the beneficial consequences of people’s actions. There are both manifest functions—actions that are intended to help some part of the system—and latent functions—unintended consequences that help social systems adjust. There are also latent dysfunctions, unintended consequences that undermine a system’s equilibrium.

2. In trying to explain divorce, a functionalist would look at how industrialization and urbanization both contributed to the changing function of marriage and the family.

D. According to conflict theory, society is viewed as being composed of groups competing for scarce resources. Divorce is seen as the outcome of the shifting balance of power within the family. As women have gained power and tried to address inequalities in the relationship, men have resisted.

E. The perspectives differ in their level of analysis. Macro-level analysis—an examination of large-scale patterns of society is the focus for functional and conflict analysis. Micro-level analysis—an examination of social interaction is the focus for symbolic interactionism.

F. Each perspective provides a different and often sharply contrasting picture of the world. Sociologists use all three perspectives because no one theory or level of analysis encompasses all of reality.

G. Research without theory is of little value. It becomes a collection of meaningless facts. Theory that is unconnected to research is abstract and empty, unlikely to represent the way life really is. Theory is used to interpret research findings, and research in turn helps to generate theory. Theory and research have a reciprocal relationship.

LEARNING CHECKLIST

After reading Chapter 1, you should:

- Understand what is meant by the broader social contexts that underlie human behavior and how and why sociologists study these broader social contexts. (2)

- Know what is meant by social location and how it helps people define themselves and others define them. (2)

- Explain the sociological perspective: what it is, what it offers, and why C. Wright Mills referred to it as “the intersection of biography (the individual) and history (the social factors that influence the individual).” (2)

- Identify, understand, and make distinctions between tradition and science. (3)

- Discuss the social changes—and the changing social conditions—that fostered the development of sociology as a distinct academic discipline in the middle of the nineteenth century. (3)

- Identify and critique the sociological contributions of the following mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth century European sociologists: Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Harriet Martineau. (3—6)

- Understand how and why levels of social integration may affect rates of suicide and how Emile Durkheim’s nineteenth-century study of suicide helped to demonstrate how social forces affect people’s behaviors. (5)

- Discuss why there were so few women sociologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how the contributions of women sociologists during this period were received and evaluated by their male counterparts. (6)
Trace the history of sociology in North America from the late 1800s to the present time, identifying the specific sociological contributions of the following American sociologists: Jane Addams, W. E. B. Du Bois, Talcott Parsons, and C. Wright Mills. (6—9)

Understand the historical tensions and ongoing debates in North American sociology between social reform and social analysis and how the sociological contributions of Jane Addams, W. E. B. Du Bois, Talcott Parsons, and C. Wright Mills fit into the tensions and debates. (8-10)

Discuss the current state of American sociology as it relates to the debate between social reform and social analysis and what role applied sociology plays in this debate. (10)

Define what is meant by theory and explain why it is an important part of sociology. (10)

Identify the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology—symbolic interactionism, functional analysis, and conflict theory—and describe the particular level of analysis, characteristics, viewpoints, and concerns that are associated within each of these. (10—16)

**KEY TERMS**

After studying the chapter, review the definition for each of the following terms.

**applied sociology**: sociology that is used to solve social problems—from the micro level of family relationships to the macro level of war and pollution (9)

**basic (or pure) sociology**: sociological research whose only purpose is to make discoveries about life in human groups, not to make changes in those groups (9)

**class conflict**: Karl Marx's term for the struggle between owners (the bourgeoisie) and workers (the proletariat) (4)

**conflict theory**: a theoretical framework in which society is viewed as being composed of groups competing for scarce resources (16)

**functional analysis**: a theoretical framework in which society is viewed as a whole unit, composed of interrelated parts, each with a function that, when fulfilled, contributes to society's equilibrium; also known as functionalism and structural functionalism (14)

**macro-level analysis**: an examination of large-scale patterns of society (17)

**micro-level analysis**: an examination of small-scale patterns of society (17)

**nonverbal interaction**: communication without words through gestures, silence, and use of space. (17)

**positivism**: the application of the scientific approach to the social world (4)

**science**: requires the development of theories that can be tested by systematic research (3)

**social integration**: the degree to which people are tied to their social groups (5)

**social interaction**: what people do when they are in one another’s presence (17)

**social location**: the groups that people belong to because of their location in history and society

**society**: a group of people who share a culture and a territory (2)

**sociology**: the scientific study of society and human behavior (4)

**symbolic interactionism**: a theoretical perspective that focuses on how people use symbols to establish meaning, develop their views of the world, and communicate with one another

**theory**: a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work; and explanation of how two or more facts are related to one another (10)
KEY PEOPLE

Review the major theoretical contributions or findings of these people.

Jane Addams: Addams was the founder of Hull House—a settlement house in the immigrant community of Chicago. She invited sociologists from nearby University of Chicago to visit. In 1931, she was a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. (7)

Auguste Comte: Comte is often credited with being the founder of sociology because he was the first to suggest that the scientific method be applied to the study of the social world. (4)

Lewis Coser: Coser pointed out that conflict is likely to develop among people in close relationships because they are connected by a network of responsibilities, power, and rewards. (16)

W.E.B. Du Bois: Du Bois was the first African American to earn a doctorate at Harvard University. For most of his career, he taught sociology at Atlanta University. He was concerned about social injustice, wrote about race relations, and was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Emile Durkheim: Durkheim was responsible for getting sociology recognized as a separate discipline. He was interested in studying how social forces shape individual behavior. (5)

Harriet Martineau: An Englishwoman who studied British and United States social life and published Society in America decades before either Durkheim or Weber was born. (6)

Karl Marx: Marx believed that social development grew out of conflict between social classes; under capitalism, this conflict was between the bourgeoisie—those who own the means to produce wealth—and the proletariat—the mass of workers. His work is associated with the conflict perspective. (4)

Robert Merton: Merton contributed the terms manifest and latent functions and latent dysfunctions to the functionalist perspective. (14)

C. Wright Mills: Mills suggested that external influences—or a person’s experiences—become part of his or her thinking and motivations and explain social behavior. In the 1950s, he urged U.S. sociologists to get back to social reform. He argued that research without theory is of little value, simply a collection of unrelated facts, and theory that is unconnected to research is abstract and empty, unlikely to represent the way life really is.

Talcott Parsons: Parsons’ work dominated sociology in the 1940s and 1950s. He developed abstract models of how the parts of society harmoniously work together. (9)

Herbert Spencer: Another early social philosopher, Spencer believed that societies evolve from barbarian to civilized forms. He was the first to use the expression “the survival of the fittest” to reflect his belief that social evolution depended on the survival of the most capable and intelligent and the extinction of the less capable. His views became known as social Darwinism. (4)

Max Weber: Among Weber’s many contributions to sociology were his study of the relationship between the emergence of Protestant belief system and the rise of capitalism. He believed that sociologists should not allow their personal values to affect their social research and objectivity should become the hallmark of sociology.