



Helen H. Richardson/The Denver Post

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Thinking About and Researching the Social World

Learning Objectives

- 2.1 Identify the notable contributions of the most influential classical sociological theorists.
- 2.2 Explain the three major categories of contemporary theories.
- 2.3 Describe the scientific method and various methods of sociological research.
- 2.4 Summarize five key issues in social research.

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Do Sociological Theory and Research Help Us Understand Today's Overheated Politics?

Since the 2016 election of Donald Trump, American politics has been far more fraught than usual with political maneuvering, fiery rhetoric, and intense partisanship. Trump has been reported to revel in the chaos that was characteristic of both his campaign and presidency. More importantly, as President Trump has aggressively sought to implement his largely conservative agenda, liberals have ramped up their rhetoric and political opposition to it.

How would a sociologist deal with such highly partisan political action and mutual antagonism? The answer depends to a large extent on which sociologist you ask. Like other scientists, sociologists use theories and do research to make sense of the phenomena they study. A sociologist's perspective on any given issue is therefore framed by the particular explanatory theories and research methods to which he or she subscribes.

Theoretically, some sociologists suggest that partisan political maneuvering and debate, even if impassioned, are a normal aspect of stable government, necessary to resolve issues and move society forward. Others believe that factions fighting to promote their own interests are enacting a simple, if large-scale, power struggle. Still others might focus on the interaction of those involved in the conflict.

In this chapter, we first identify the particular sociological theories that frame each of these perspectives—and many more. Each is the product of decades (and sometimes centuries) of development, and each has undergone testing, modification, and critique by some of sociology's greatest minds. As you learn about the notable sociological thinkers—both classical and contemporary—and the theories they developed, consider the sociopolitical events that shaped them during their lives. Consider too the events that have shaped, and are shaping, you and your own perspectives on the world. Finally, use those perspectives

(yours and those of sociologists) to think about U.S. politics today.

Second, we will look at the major research methods in sociology. Some of them are qualitative, involving observation and interviews. Using those methods, a sociologist interested in the political issues mentioned above could, for example, observe an acrimonious debate in the U.S. Senate or interview senators on both sides of that debate. Quantitative methods include surveys of those involved and experiments involving small groups on either side of a major political issue. Instead of doing their own survey on this issue, sociological researchers could reanalyze relevant data collected by the government or other researchers. Another method involves a historical-comparative analysis to see whether political debates in the United States were more or less heated at other times and/or in other parts of the world. Finally, a researcher could analyze the content of the *Congressional Record*, the official record of daily debates and proceedings in the Congress, to study differences in political debates over time.

The current high level of political tension in the United States gives the theorist and the researcher much to think about and to study.

Theorizing the Social World

Theories are sets of interrelated ideas that have a wide range of applications, deal with centrally important issues, and have stood the test of time (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2018). Theories have stood the test of time when they continue to be applicable to the changing social world and have withstood challenges from those who accept other theories. Sociological theories are necessary to make sense of both the innumerable social phenomena and the many highly detailed findings of sociological research. Without such theories, we would have little more than knowledge of isolated bits of the social world. However, once those theories have been created, they can be applied broadly to such areas as the economy, organizations, religion, society as a whole, and even the

globe. The theories to be discussed in this chapter deal with very important social issues that have affected the social world for centuries and will likely continue to affect it. Among these issues are violence, suicide, alienation and exploitation in the work world, and revolution.

Classical Sociological Theory

The emergence of sociological theory was closely related to intellectual and social developments throughout the nineteenth century in Europe. It is important to recognize that sociological theory did not develop in isolation or come of age in a social vacuum. In Chapter 1, we briefly mentioned the impact of the Industrial Revolution. Other changes that profoundly affected sociological theorizing were the political revolutions that wracked European society (especially the French Revolution, 1789–1799), the rise of socialism, the women’s rights movement, the urbanization occurring throughout Europe, ferment in the religious realm, and the growth of science.

Among the most important early sociological theorists are Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, and Herbert Spencer.

- *Auguste Comte* (1798–1857) is noted, as pointed out in Chapter 1, for the invention of the term *sociology*, development of a general theory of the social world, and interest in developing a science of sociology (Pickering 2011).
- *Harriet Martineau* (1802–1876), like Comte, developed a scientific and general theory, although she is best known today for her feminist, women-centered sociology (Hoecker-Drysdale 2011).
- *Herbert Spencer* (1820–1903) also developed a general, scientific theory of society, but his overriding theoretical interest was in social change, specifically evolution in not only the physical domain but also the intellectual and social domains (Francis 2011).

Although Comte, Martineau, and Spencer were important predecessors, the three theorists to be discussed in this section—Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim—are the most



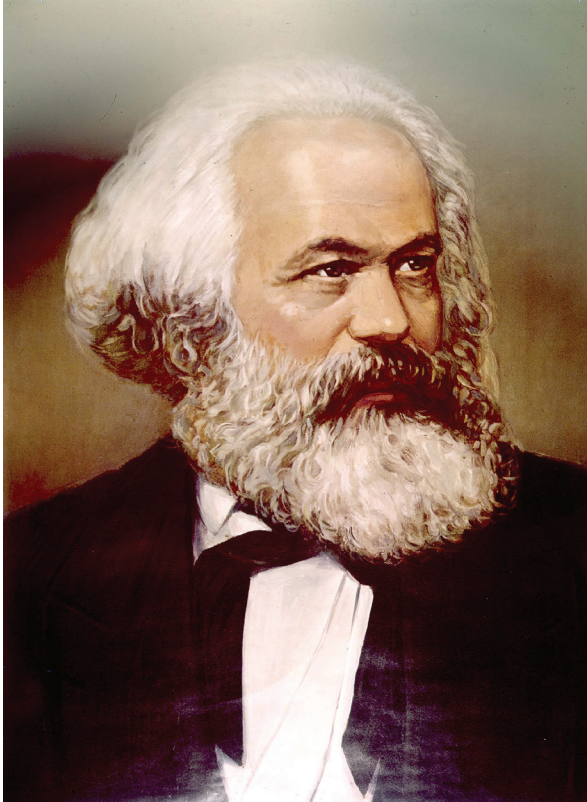
Hulton-Deutsch/Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis via Getty Images

Harriet Martineau was a social theorist essential for, among other things, bringing attention to gender in sociology.

significant of the classical era’s social theorists and of the greatest continuing contemporary relevance to sociology (and other fields).

Karl Marx

Marx (1818–1883) focused most of his attention on the structure of capitalist society, a relatively new phenomenon in his day. Marx defined **capitalism** as an economic system based on the fact that one group of people—the **capitalists**—owns what is needed for production, including factories, machines, and tools. A second group—the **proletariat**, or workers—owns little or nothing except their capacity for work and labor. In order to work and survive, the workers must sell their labor time, primarily their working hours, to the capitalists in exchange for wages. In Marx’s view, the capitalist system is marked by **exploitation** (Carver 2018). The proletariat produces virtually everything but gets only a small portion of the income derived



Roger Violett/Getty Images

Karl Marx was in many ways *the* most important social theorist because his thinking profoundly affected *both* social theory *and* the social world.

from the sale of the products. The capitalists, who do little productive work, reap the vast majority of the rewards. In other words, the capitalists *exploit* the workers. Furthermore, driven by the need to compete in the marketplace, the capitalists are forced to keep costs, including wages, as low as possible. Then, as competition with other capitalists intensifies, the pressure is on to reduce wages further. As a result, the proletariat barely subsists, living a miserable, animal-like existence.

In addition, the workers experience **alienation** on the job and in the workplace (Carver 2018; Mészáros 2006). They are alienated because

- The work they do—for example, repetitively and mechanically inserting wicks into candles or attaching hubcaps to cars—is not a natural expression of human skills, abilities, and creativity.
- They have little or no connection to the finished product.

- Instead of working harmoniously with their fellow workers, they may have little or no contact with them. In fact, they are likely to be in competition or outright conflict with them over, for example, who keeps and who loses their jobs.

Thus, what defines people as human beings—their ability to think, to act on the basis of that thought, to be creative, to interact with other human beings—is denied to the workers in capitalism. As capitalists adopt new technologies to make their companies more competitive, alienation among the workers increases. For example, faster, more mechanized assembly lines make it even more difficult for coworkers to relate to one another.

Over time, Marx believed, the workers' situation would grow much worse as the capitalists increased the level of exploitation and restructured the work so that the proletariat became even more alienated. The gap between these two social classes would grow wider and increasingly visible in terms of the two groups' economic positions and the nature of their work. Once workers understood how capitalism “really” worked, especially the ways in which it worked to their detriment, they would rise up and overthrow that system in what Marx called a proletarian revolution.

According to Marx, the outcome of the proletarian revolution would be the creation of a communist society. Interestingly, Marx had very little to say explicitly about what a communist society would look like. In fact, he was highly critical of utopian thinkers who wasted their time drawing beautiful portraits of an imaginary future state. Marx was too much the sociologist and concentrated instead on trying to better understand the structures of capitalist society. He was particularly interested in the ways in which they operated, especially to the advantage of the capitalists and to the disadvantage of the proletariat.

Marx believed that his work was needed because the capitalist class tried hard to make sure that the proletariat did not truly understand the nature of capitalism. One of the ways in which the capitalists did this was to produce a set of ideas, an ideology, which distorted the reality of capitalism and concealed the ways in which it really operated. As a result, the proletariat suffered from **false consciousness**—the workers did not

truly understand capitalism and may have even believed, erroneously, that the system operated fairly and perhaps even to their benefit. Marx's work was devoted to providing the members of the proletariat with the knowledge they needed to see through these false ideas and achieve a truer understanding of the workings of capitalism.

Marx hypothesized that the workers could develop **class consciousness**, and such a collective consciousness would lead them to truly understand capitalism, their role in it, and their relationship to one another as well as to the capitalists. Class consciousness was a prerequisite of the revolutionary actions to be undertaken by the proletariat. In contrast, the capitalists could never achieve class consciousness because, in Marx's view, they were too deeply involved in capitalism to be able to see how it truly operated.

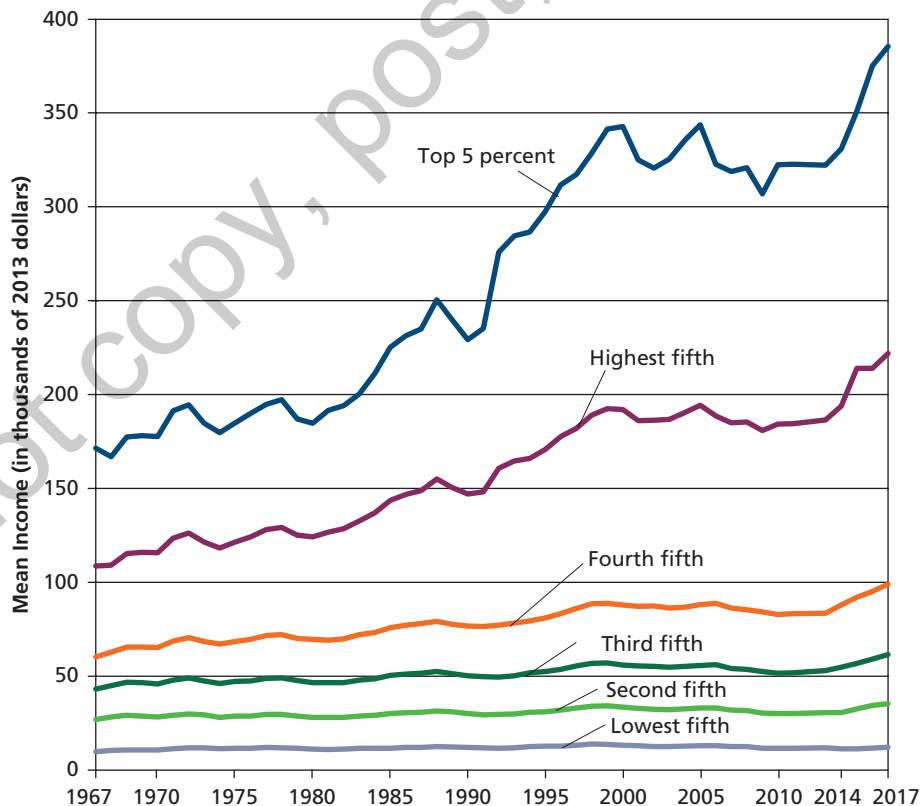
ASK YOURSELF

Do you agree with Marx's characterizations of false consciousness and class consciousness? Why or why not? Give some examples from your own experience to support your answer.

Marx's theories about capitalism are relevant to contemporary society. For example, in the United States, a capitalist country, the income gap that Marx predicted between those at the top of the economic system and the rest of the population is huge and growing. In 2016, the top 20 percent of the population in terms of household income had a greater average income than the rest of the population combined (U.S. Census 2017a). As you

FIGURE 2.1

Mean Income Received by Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent, All Races: 1967–2017



Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements.

can see in Figure 2.1, those at the top have greatly increased their average income since 1967; this is especially true of the top 5 percent of the population. Furthermore, the top 1 percent controlled almost 40 percent of the nation's wealth in 2016.

Marx also theorized that capitalism would force the capitalists to find the cheapest sources of labor and resources wherever they existed in the world. As Marx predicted, corporations continue to scour the globe for workers willing to work for lower wages, driving down pay closer to home and reaping as much profit as possible from lower labor costs.

However, history has failed to bear out much of Marx's thinking about the demise of capitalism. For example, there has been no proletarian revolution, and one seems less likely than ever. This is the case, if for no other reason, because the members of the proletariat of greatest interest to Marx—manufacturing workers—are rapidly declining in number and importance, at least in developed countries like the United States (Rifkin 1995). Despite the threats to the proletariat, capitalism continues to exist, and Marx's ways of thinking about it, and the concepts he developed for that analysis, continue to be useful. The development of several of these concepts is portrayed in the recent film *The Young Karl Marx* (2017).

Max Weber

Although Karl Marx was an important social theorist, he developed his ideas outside the academic world. It took time for those radical ideas to gain recognition from scholars. In contrast, Max Weber (1864–1920; pronounced VAY-ber) was a leading academician of his day (Kalberg 2011, 2017). Weber, like Marx, devoted great attention to the economy.

Weber's best-known work—*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1904–1905] 1958)—is part of his historical-comparative study of religion in various societies throughout the world. One of his main objectives was to analyze the relationship between the economy and religion. Weber focused on the central role religion had played in the Western world's economic development.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, it was Protestantism in general, and especially Calvinism, that led to the rise of capitalism in the West and not in other areas of the world. Calvinists believed

that people were predestined to go to heaven or hell; that is, they would end up in heaven or hell no matter what they did or did not do. While they could not affect their destiny, they could uncover “signs” that indicated whether they were “saved” and going to heaven. Economic success was a particularly important sign that one was saved. However, isolated successful economic successes were not sufficient. Calvinists had to devote their lives to hard work and economic success, as well as to other “good works.” At the same time, the Calvinists were quite frugal. All of this was central to the distinctive ethical system of the Calvinists, and more generally Protestants, that Weber referred to as the **Protestant ethic**.

Weber was interested not only in the Protestant ethic but also in the “spirit of capitalism” it helped spawn. The Protestant ethic was a system of ideas closely associated with religion, while the spirit of capitalism involved a transformation of those ideas into a perspective linked directly to the economy. As the economy came to be infused with the spirit of capitalism, it was transformed into a capitalist economic system. Eventually, however, the spirit of capitalism, and later capitalism itself, grew apart from its roots in Calvinism and the Protestant ethic. Capitalist thinking eventually could not accommodate such irrational forms of thought as ethics and religion.

Despite his attention to it, Weber was *not* interested in capitalism per se. He was more interested in the broader phenomenon of **rationalization**, or the process by which social structures are increasingly characterized by the most direct and efficient means to their ends. In Weber's view, this process was becoming more and more common in many sectors of society, including the economy, especially in bureaucracies and in the most rational economic system—capitalism. Capitalism is rational because of, for example, its continual efforts to find ways to produce more profitable products efficiently, with fewer inputs and simpler processes. A specific and early example of rationalization in capitalism is the assembly line, in which raw materials enter the line and finished products emerge at the end. Fewer workers performed very simple tasks in order to allow the assembly line to function efficiently. More recently, manufacturers have added more rational, “lean” production methods, such as the just-in-time inventory system (Janoski 2015). Instead of storing

extra components in case they are needed, the just-in-time system relies on the delivery of materials when they are needed in the production process. This makes for highly efficient use of storage space and the funds needed to purchase materials.

Weber saw rationalization as leading to an “iron cage” of rationalized systems. Such a cage makes it increasingly difficult for people to escape the process. This gives a clear sense of his negative opinion of rationalization.

Such a negative view of rationalization and its constraints and socially harmful effects has persisted. It is frequently portrayed in popular entertainment, including George Orwell’s novel, and later movie, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), as well as movies such as *Brazil* (1985), *V for Vendetta* (2005), the *Hunger Games* series (2012–2015), and television programs like *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–present) and *Black Mirror* (2011–present).

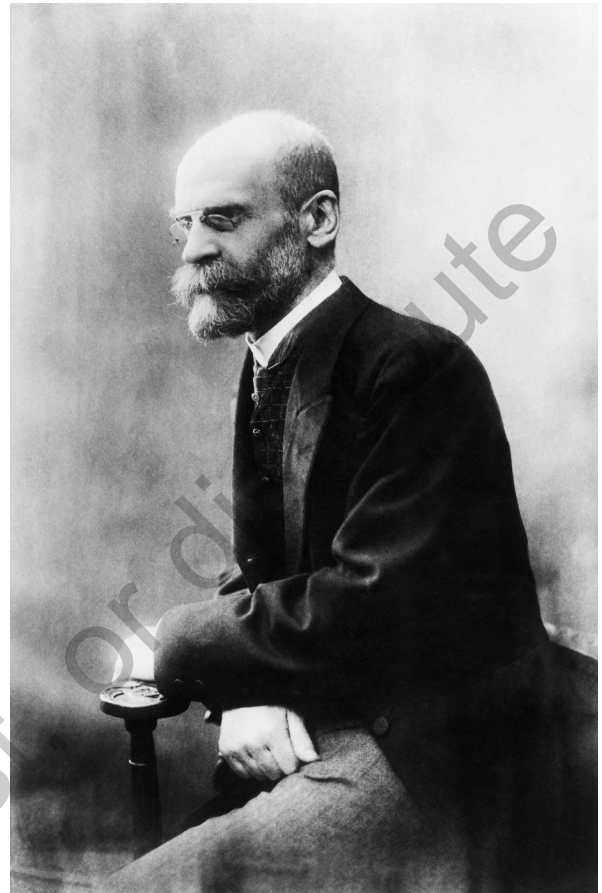
ASK YOURSELF

Efforts to exploit, alienate, and control us continue to this day. Is only capitalism to blame for this? Are there causes to be found in even larger systems in the modern world? Or are more microscopic sources, such as the nature of human beings, responsible for these efforts?

In sum, while for Marx the key problems in the modern world were the exploitation and alienation that are part of the capitalist economy, for Weber the central problem was the control that rationalized structures such as capitalism exercise over us in virtually all aspects of our lives. Furthermore, while Marx was optimistic and had great hope for socialism and communism, Weber was a pessimist about most things. Socialism and communism, he felt, would not eliminate or prevent the iron cage from enveloping us: “Not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now” (Weber [1919] 1958, 128).

Émile Durkheim

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) developed a theoretical orientation very different from those of his



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Émile Durkheim had a number of powerful effects on sociology including focusing on macro-level social phenomena (“social facts”) and doing theoretically informed empirical research.

peers (Fournier 2013; Milibrandt and Pearce 2011). For Durkheim, the major concern of the science of sociology was **social facts**. These are macro-level phenomena, such as social structures and cultural norms and values, that stand apart from people and, more important, impose themselves on people. Examples of social facts that impose themselves on you include the structures of your university and the U.S. government. Durkheim felt that such structures and their constraints were not only necessary but also highly desirable.

Both Marx and Weber had a generally positive sense of people as thoughtful, creative, and naturally social. They criticized social structures for stifling and distorting people’s innate characteristics. In contrast, Durkheim had a largely negative

view of people as being slaves to their passions, such as lust, gluttony, and other deadly sins. Left to their own devices, he believed, people would seek to satisfy those passions. However, the satisfaction of one passion would simply lead to the need to satisfy other passions. This endless succession of passions could never be satisfied. In Durkheim's view, passions should be limited, but people are unable to exercise this control themselves. They need social facts that are capable of limiting and controlling their passions.

The most important of these social facts is the **collective conscience**, or the set of beliefs shared by people throughout society (Bowring 2016). In Durkheim's view, the collective conscience is highly desirable not only for society but also for individuals. For example, it is good for both society and individuals that we share the belief that we are not supposed to kill one another. Without a collective conscience, murderous passions would be left to run wild. Individuals would be destroyed, of course, and eventually so would society.

This leads us to Durkheim's *Suicide* ([1897] 1951), one of the most famous research studies in the history of sociology. Because he was a sociologist, Durkheim did not focus on why any given individual committed suicide. Rather, he dealt with the more collective issue of suicide rates and why one group of people had a higher rate of suicide than another. The study was in many ways an ideal example of the power of sociological research. Using publicly available data, Durkheim found, for example, that suicide rates were not related to psychological and biological factors such as alcoholism or race and heredity. The causes of differences in suicide rates were *not* to be found within individuals. Rather, suicide rates were related to social factors that exert negative pressure on the individual. These include collective feelings of rootlessness and normlessness. Suicide also constitutes a threat to society because those who commit suicide are rejecting a key aspect of the collective conscience—that one should not kill oneself.

Suicide has at least two important characteristics. First, the study was designed, like much sociological research today, to contribute to the public understanding of an important sociological problem or issue. Second, and more important for the purposes of this introduction to sociology, it demonstrated the power of sociology to explain

one of the most private and personal of acts. Suicide had previously been seen as the province of the field of psychology, and responsibility for the act was most often accorded to the individual. Durkheim believed that if sociology could be shown to be applicable to suicide, it could deal with any and all social phenomena.

ASK YOURSELF

What do you think led Durkheim to believe that if sociology could explain suicide, it could explain all social phenomena? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

Durkheim differentiated among four types of suicide. The most important one for our purposes is *anomic suicide*. **Anomie** is defined as people's feeling that they do not know what is expected of them in society—the feeling of being adrift in society without any clear or secure moorings. According to Durkheim, the risk of anomic suicide increases when people do not know what is expected of them, when society's regulation over them is low, and when their passions are allowed to run wild.

More generally, Durkheim believed that anomie is the defining problem of the modern world. In contrast to Marx and Weber, who worried about too much external control over people, Durkheim, at least in his thinking on anomie, worried about too little control, especially over passions. This broad view appeared in another famous work by Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* ([1893] 1964). He began by describing an early form of society with little division of labor. People there were held together by a type of solidarity—**mechanical solidarity**—stemming from the fact that they all did pretty much the same kinds of work, including hunting, gathering, and cooking. More important, people in this type of society had a strong collective conscience.

However, as Durkheim demonstrated, an increasing division of labor took place over time. Instead of continuing to do the same sorts of things, people began to specialize as, for example, hunters, farmers, and cooks. What held them together was

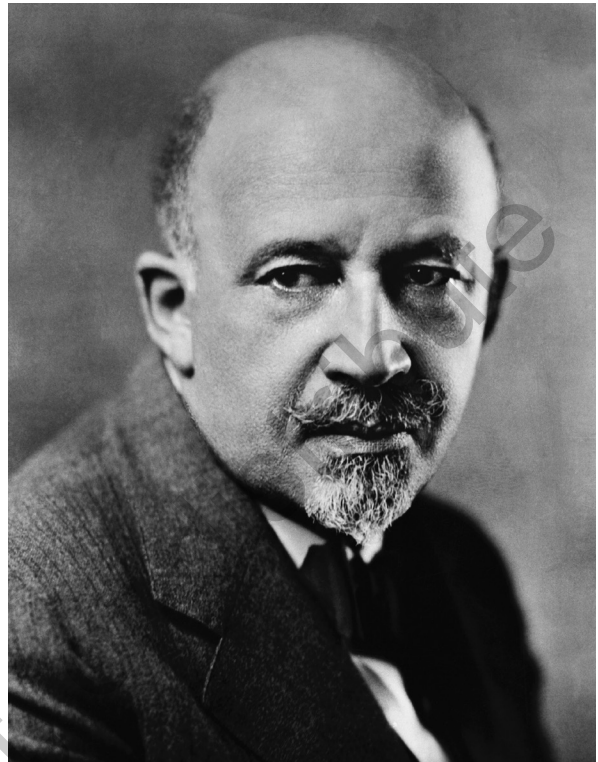
not their similarities but their differences. That is, they had become more dependent on one another; people needed what others did and produced in order to survive. Durkheim called this later form of social organization **organic solidarity**. This can be a powerful form of solidarity, but it is accompanied by a decline in the power of the collective conscience. Because people were doing such different things, they no longer necessarily believed as strongly in the same set of ideas. This weakened collective conscience was a problem, Durkheim argued, because it progressively lost the power to control people's passions. Further, because of the weakened collective conscience, people were more likely to feel anomic and, among other things, were more likely to commit anomic suicide.

Georg Simmel

Georg Simmel's (1858–1918) major importance in contemporary sociology lies in his contributions to micro theory. Simmel believed that sociologists should focus on the way in which conscious individuals interact and associate with one another (Scaff 2011). Simmel was interested in the *forms* taken by social interaction. One such form involves the interaction between superiors and subordinates. He was also interested in the *types* of people who engage in interaction. For example, one type is the poor person and another is the rich person. For Simmel, it was the nature of the interaction between these two types of people and not the nature of the people themselves that was of greatest importance. Therefore, poverty is not about the nature of the poor person but about the kind of interaction (e.g., help for, or hostility toward, the poor) that takes place between the poor and the rich.

W. E. B. Du Bois

Du Bois is best known in sociology for his theoretical ideas, in particular the “color line” existing between whites and blacks in the United States. This barrier was physical in the sense that African Americans could be distinguished visually, through their darker skin color, from white Americans. The barrier was also political in that much of the white population did not see African Americans as “true” Americans. As a result, they



Bethmann/Getty Images

W. E. B. Du Bois was a pioneer in efforts to bring a focus on race to the field of sociology.

denied African Americans many political rights, such as the right to vote. And the barrier was psychological because, among other things, African Americans found it difficult to see themselves in ways other than the ways in which white society saw them.

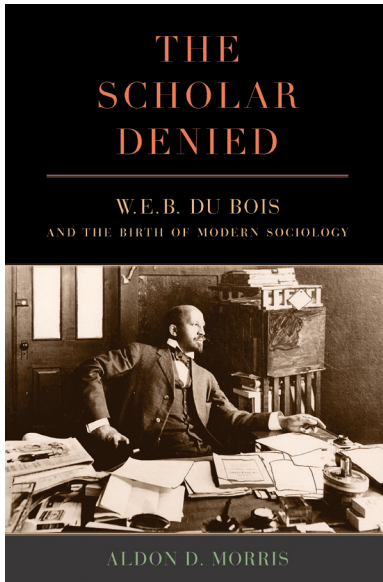
One of Du Bois's goals, especially in *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1966), was to lift the veil of race and give whites a glimpse of “Negroes” in America. He also wanted to show blacks that they could see themselves in a different way, especially outside the view that white society had prescribed for them. Politically, he hoped for the day when the veil would be lifted forever, thereby freeing blacks. However, he did understand that destroying the veil of race would require a great deal of time and effort.

Another of Du Bois's important ideas is **double consciousness**. By this he meant that black Americans have a sense of “two-ness,” of being American and of being African American. Black Americans want to tear down the barriers that

***The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (University of California Press, 2015)**

Aldon D. Morris

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According to Morris, Du Bois has not been given the credit he deserves in establishing scientific sociology in the United States. In fact, Morris argues that the work of Du Bois was intentionally ignored by the white founders of American sociology, such as Albion Small, who defended social Darwinism, or the idea that society is guided by natural laws. Instead of trying to empirically prove that these natural laws existed, these early sociologists developed speculative grand theories. Their belief in the existence of natural laws also led them to minimize the role of human agency in society and prevented them from developing a comparative perspective. Du Bois attempted to challenge social Darwinism by using empirical methodology to demonstrate that racial inferiority was not a result of biology or natural law but a product of society. Two decades before the Chicago School of sociology started using scientific methodology

to investigate urban ethnic and immigrant communities, Du Bois conducted an empirical study of the black community in Philadelphia. His findings were published in his book *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1996), which Morris hails as "the first major empirical sociological study" (2015, 45). However, the early Chicago School sociologists failed to acknowledge Du Bois's contributions in their work.

Even though Du Bois received his doctorate from Harvard, he was denied an academic position at a prestigious American university because of his race. He pursued his scholarly career at Atlanta University, a historically black college, where he established a sociology department with a strong empirical research program. Even though most American sociologists ignored Du Bois's work, he gained a famous advocate in Germany—Max Weber. Weber invited Du Bois to write an article on caste relations for his journal (*Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*) and tried to have a translation of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* published in Germany. Weber shared Du Bois's position that race was a social construct shaped by socioeconomic conditions, not biology. Like Du Bois, Weber was interested in the intersections between class and race relations and agreed that the color line was a critical problem of their era. Morris suggests that Weber's theory of caste and status groups, as well as his embrace of cultural pluralism later in his career, was influenced by the work of Du Bois. ●

Visit edge.sagepub.com/ritzeressentials4e to

- Listen to Morris's lecture on the relevance of Du Bois in science, the civil rights movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement.
- Read an article about Morris and his book *The Scholar Denied* that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*.

confront them but do not want to give up their identity, traditions, knowledge, and experience. That is, black Americans, including former President Barack Obama (Terrill 2015), are both inside and outside dominant, white American society.

ASK YOURSELF

How many “consciousnesses” do you have? What are they? In what ways are they sources of satisfaction for you? In what ways do they stress you?

Thorstein Veblen

Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) was concerned with the ways in which the upper classes demonstrate their wealth. One way to show off wealth is through *conspicuous leisure*, or doing things that demonstrate quite publicly that one does not need to do what most people consider to be work. However, the problem with conspicuous leisure is that it is often difficult for very many others to witness these displays.

Thus, over time the focus for the wealthy tends to shift from publicly demonstrating a waste of time to publicly demonstrating a waste of money. The waste of money is central to Veblen’s most famous idea, **conspicuous consumption**. It is much easier for others to see conspicuous consumption (e.g., huge mansions) than it is for them to see conspicuous leisure.

Veblen is important because he focused on consumption at a time when it was largely ignored by other social theorists. Furthermore, his specific ideas, especially conspicuous consumption, continue to be applied to the social world.

ASK YOURSELF

Picture some of the many examples of conspicuous consumption. Consider the brand names on your clothing, smartphone, and laptop. Are they expensive brands with visible logos and high status or less expensive, no-name brands with little or no status? Are you less likely to buy clothing (and other products) with visible brand names because you are more interested in creating your own style?

Contemporary Sociological Theory

As sociology has developed and grown as a discipline, the grand theories of earlier sociologists have evolved and branched out into at least a dozen newer theories. The work of the classical theorists has influenced each of these theories. As Table 2.1 shows, these contemporary theories and the others reviewed in the rest of this chapter can be categorized under three broad headings: structural/functional, conflict/critical, and inter/actionist theories.

Structural/Functional Theories

Structural/functional theories focus on large-scale social phenomena, including the state and culture (see Chapter 3 for more on culture). The two major theories under the broad heading of structural/functional theories are *structural-functionalism*, which looks at both social structures and their functions, and *structuralism*, which concerns itself solely with social structures, without concern for their functions. Note that while the names sound the same, structural-functionalism is one theory under the broader heading of structural/functional theories.

Structural-Functionalism

Structural-functionalism focuses on social structures as well as the functions that such

TABLE 2.1

Major Sociological Theories

STRUCTURAL/FUNCTIONAL THEORIES	CONFLICT/CRITICAL THEORIES	INTER/ACTIONIST THEORIES
Structural-functionalism	Conflict theory	Symbolic interactionism
Structuralism	Critical theory	Ethnomethodology
	Feminist theory	Exchange theory
	Queer theory	Rational choice theory
	Critical theories of race and racism	
	Postmodern theory	

structures perform. Structural-functionalists are influenced by the work of, among others, Émile Durkheim, who discussed, for example, the functions of structural limits placed on deviance. Structural-functional theorists tend to have a positive view of social structures such as the military, the police, and the Department of Homeland Security. Structural-functional theorists also assert that those structures are desirable, necessary, and even impossible to do without. However, as you will see later, not all sociologists view social structures as completely positive. Structural-functionalism tends to be a “conservative” theory. The dominant view is that if given structures exist and are functional—and it is often assumed that if they exist, they are functional—they ought to be retained and conserved.

A series of well-known and useful concepts have been developed by structural-functionalists, especially Robert Merton ([1949] 1968; Crothers 2018). One central concept in Merton’s version of structural-functionalism is **functions**, or the observable, positive consequences of a structure that help it survive, adapt, and adjust. National borders are functional in various ways. For example, the passport controls at borders allow a country to monitor who is entering the country and to refuse entry to those it considers undesirable or dangerous. This function has become increasingly important in the era of global terrorism.

Merton further elaborated on his basic theory by differentiating between two types of functions. The first encompasses **manifest functions**, or positive consequences brought about consciously and purposely. For example, taxes (tariffs) are imposed on goods imported into the United States from elsewhere in the world in order to make the prices of those goods higher compared with American-made goods and thus protect U.S.-based producers. That is a manifest function of tariffs. However, such actions often have **latent functions**, or unintended positive consequences. For example, when foreign products become more expensive and therefore less desirable, U.S. manufacturers may produce more and perhaps better goods in the United States. In addition, more jobs for Americans may be created. Note that in these examples, both manifest and latent functions, like all functions within the structural-functionalist perspective, are positive.

One more concept of note is the idea of **unanticipated consequences**, or consequences that are unexpected and can be either positive or, more importantly, negative. A negative unanticipated consequence of increased tariffs is a trade war. China, for example, has responded to an increase in U.S. tariffs by raising its own tariffs on U.S. imports. As the United States retaliates with new and still higher tariffs, we could be in the midst of an unanticipated, and probably undesirable, trade war involving the United States, China, and perhaps other nations. Such a trade war remained a possibility in early 2019, although negotiations to prevent it were ongoing.

Structural-functionalism is greatly enriched when we add the concept of **dysfunctions**, or observable consequences that negatively affect the ability of a given system to survive, adapt, or adjust. While border and passport controls clearly have functions, they also have dysfunctions. After 9/11, Congress passed many immigration-related acts. As a result, it has become much more difficult for everyone to enter the United States (Kurzban 2006). This is true not only for potential terrorists but also for legitimate workers and businesspeople. As a result, many talented workers and businesspeople from other countries have decided to go elsewhere in the world, where there are fewer restrictions on their ability to come and go. However, large numbers of students continue to flock to the United States.

The fact that both functions and dysfunctions are associated with structures raises the issue of the relative weight of the functions and the dysfunctions. How can we determine whether a given structure is predominantly functional or dysfunctional? In terms of the tightening of border controls, we would need to weigh the benefits of keeping out potential terrorists against the losses in international business transactions.

Structuralism

Structuralism focuses on structures but is not concerned with their functions. While structural-functionalism focuses on quite visible structures, such as border fences, structuralism is more interested in the social impacts of hidden or underlying structures, such as the global economic order or gender relations. It adopts the view that these hidden structures determine what transpires on

the surface of the social world. This perspective comes from the field of linguistics, which has largely adopted the view that the surface, the way we speak and express ourselves, is determined by an underlying grammatical system (Saussure [1916] 1966). A sociological example would be that behind-the-scenes actions of capitalists and the capitalist system determine the public positions taken by political leaders.

Marx can be seen as a structuralist because he was interested in the hidden structures that determine how capitalism works. So, for example, on the surface capitalism seems to operate to the benefit of all. However, hidden below the surface is a structure that operates mostly for the benefit of the capitalists, who exploit the workers and often pay them subsistence wages. Similarly, capitalists argue that the value of products is determined by supply and demand in the market. In contrast, Marx argued that hidden beneath the surface is the fact that value comes from the labor that goes into the products, and this labor comes entirely from the workers.

Marx's frequent collaborator Friedrich Engels ([1884] 1970) looked at relationships between women and men and theorized that the structures of capitalism and patriarchy kept women subordinated to men.

Engels believed that female oppression was rooted in the hidden and underlying structure of private property rights in capitalism. As a result, he thought that the key to ending that oppression was to abolish private property. The connections he drew between gender inequality and the underlying structure of society have proved to be enduring, and many contemporary feminist theorists have built more sophisticated analyses on them (Chae 2014).

A structuralist approach is useful because it leads sociologists to look beyond the surface for underlying structures and realities, which determine what transpires on the surface. Thus, for example, military threats made by North Korea, and its test-firing of missiles, may not really be about military matters at all but instead about that country's failing economic system. North Korea may hope that the symbolic expression of military power will distract its citizens, strengthen its global prestige, frighten others, and perhaps coerce other countries, especially the United States, into providing economic aid. The threat posed by North

Korea's nuclear missiles prompted President Trump to meet with North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 and to make various concessions such as halting, at least temporarily, "war games" with South Korea. A follow-up meeting between these leaders in early 2019 broke down early without any agreement.

Conflict/Critical Theories

Several theories are discussed under this heading: conflict theory, critical theory, feminist theory, queer theory, critical theories of race and racism, and postmodern theory. They all tend to emphasize stresses, strains, and conflicts in society. They are critical of society in a variety of different ways, especially of the power exercised over less powerful members of society.

Conflict Theory

The best known of these theories, at least in American sociology, is **conflict theory** (R. Collins 2012). It has roots in Marx's theory, and much of it can be seen as an inversion of structural-functionalism, which conflict theory was designed to compete with and to counteract. While structural-functionalism emphasizes what is positive about society, conflict theory focuses on its negative aspects. To the structural-functionalist, society is held together by consensus; virtually everyone accepts the social structure, its legitimacy, and its benefits. To the conflict theorist, in contrast, society is held together by coercion. Those adversely affected by society, especially economically, would rebel were it not for coercive forces such as the police, the courts, and the military.

Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) was strongly influenced by Marx, but he was more strongly motivated by a desire to develop a viable alternative to structural-functionalism. For example, while structural-functionalists tend to see society as static, conflict theorists like Dahrendorf emphasize the ever-present possibility of change. Where structural-functionalists see the orderliness of society, conflict theorists see dissension and conflict everywhere. Finally, structural-functionalists focus on the sources of cohesion internal to society, while conflict theorists stress the coercion and power that holds together an otherwise fractious society.



The high pay and decision-making power of McDonald's executives contrasts sharply with the relative powerlessness of the company's low-paid employees. Some of those employees and their supporters are shown here demonstrating for higher pay. Structural conflicts like this one are the focus of conflict theory.

Dahrendorf offered a very sociological view of authority, arguing that it resides not in individuals (e.g., Donald J. Trump) but in positions (e.g., the presidency of the United States) and in various associations of people. In his view, those associations are controlled by a hierarchy of authority positions and the people who occupy them. However, there are many such associations in any society. Thus, a person may be in authority in one type of association but be subordinate in many others.

What most interested Dahrendorf was the potential for conflict between those in positions of authority and those in subordinate positions. They usually have very different interests. Like authority, those interests are not characteristics of individuals but rather are linked to the positions they hold. For example, the top management of a retail or fast-food corporation such as Walmart or McDonald's is interested in making the corporation more profitable by keeping wages low. In contrast, those who hold such low-level jobs as cashier or stock clerk are interested in increasing their wages to meet basic needs. Because of this inherent tension and conflict, authority within associations is always tenuous.

Critical Theory

While Marx's work was critical of the capitalist economy, **critical theory** shifts the focus to culture. Marx believed that culture is shaped by the economic system. In contrast, the critical school has argued that by the early twentieth century, and at an ever-accelerating rate to this day, culture has become important in its own right. Furthermore, in many ways it has come to be more important than the economic system. Instead of being controlled by the capitalist economy, more of us are controlled—and controlled more often—by culture in general, specifically by the culture industry.

The **culture industry** consists of the rationalized and bureaucratized structures that control modern culture. In their early years, the 1920s and 1930s, critical theorists focused on radio, magazines, and movies. Today, movies remain important, but the focus has shifted to television and various aspects of the internet, especially Facebook. These are critiqued for producing, or serving as an outlet for, **mass culture**, or cultural elements that are administered by organizations, lack spontaneity, and are phony. Two features of mass culture and its dissemination by the culture industry are of particular concern to critical theorists:

- *Falseness*. True culture should emanate from the people, but mass culture involves pre-packaged sets of ideas that falsify reality. The so-called reality shows (e.g., *Survivor*) are a contemporary example of mass culture. These programs are also highly formulaic. They are presented as if they are authentic, but in fact they are scripted, highly controlled, and selectively edited—although in a different way than fictional dramas, comedies, and soap operas are. They are also false in the sense that they give consumers of mass culture the sense that there is a quick and easy route to fame and fortune.

- *Repressiveness*. Like Marx, the critical theorists feel that the masses need to be informed about things such as the falseness of culture so that they can develop a clear sense of society's failings and the need to rebel against them.

The effect of mass culture is to pacify, stupefy, and repress the masses so that they are far less likely to demand social change. Those who rush home nightly to catch up on their favorite reality TV shows are unlikely to have much interest in, or time for, revolutionary activities, or even civic activities and reforms.

Critical theory can be applied to some of the newest media forms, such as YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and especially Facebook (Denegri-Knott and Zwick 2012). Despite there being plenty of false and stupefying content on these sites, along with all the edifying material, the sites are not totally controlled by large rationalized bureaucracies—at least not yet. Almost all the content that appears on sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter is provided by those who also consume material on the sites. The sites exercise little control over original content; that content is arguably spontaneously produced by those who use the sites. It's tempting to conclude that these new aspects of the culture industry are not assailable from a traditional critical theory perspective. Although sites such as Facebook are not yet huge bureaucracies, they do structure what is to be found there, especially through the use of algorithms. In addition, at least some of that which is to be found there is false.

ASK YOURSELF

Do you see evidence of critical theory's ideas of falseness and repressiveness in the elements of mass culture to which you are exposed? If so, what forms do they take?

Feminist Theory

A central aspect of **feminist theory** in general is the critique of patriarchy (male dominance) and the problems it poses not only for women but also for men. Feminist theory also offers

ideas on how everyone's (women's *and* men's) situation can be bettered, if not revolutionized (Adichie 2015; Bromley 2012; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 2014; see also the journal *Feminist Theory*).

Despite the many global and individual changes in women's lives over the almost two centuries since sociology came into existence, there is also a broad consensus among feminist theorists that women continue to face extraordinary problems related directly to gender inequality. As you will learn about more in Chapter 9, these problems include, among innumerable others, a persistent wage gap between men and women in the United States and systematic and widespread rape by invading forces in wartime. These extraordinary problems require extraordinary solutions. However, feminist theories vary in the degree to which they support dramatic, even revolutionary, changes in women's situation. Some feminist theories suggest that the solution to gender inequality is to change social structures and institutions so that they are more inclusive of women and allow more gender diversity. Other feminist theories argue that because those very structures and institutions create gender difference and inequality, we must first deconstruct and then rebuild them in a wholly different way.

Women of color have sometimes been dissatisfied with feminist theory for not representing their interests very well. Several scholars argue that feminist theory generally reflects the perspective of white women while ignoring the unique experiences and viewpoints of women of color (Collins 2000; hooks 2000; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; Zinn 2012). Similarly, studies related to race tend to focus largely (or wholly) on the position of men. Thus, many contemporary feminists have advocated for scholarship that takes into account not just gender but also how it intersects with race and ethnicity, social class, and sexuality. The upcoming discussion of critical theories of race and racism provides more detail on this view.

Queer Theory

The term *queer* was originally used as a negative term for gay men. Contemporary gay men, lesbians,

bisexuals, and transgender and intersexed people have reclaimed the label *queer*, but now with a positive connotation. **Queer theory** is based on the argument that there are no fixed and stable identities that determine who we are (McCann 2016; Plummer 2019). The theory also unsettles identities that have long been thought to be fixed, stable, or natural. Among others, it unsettles *queers* as a noun, as well as gender identities in general (Butler 1990). Some queer theorists use the term **gender-queer** to refer to gender identities that are not exclusively male or female. Others believe that it is possible to be **pangender**, or identify as all genders. New pronouns such as *xe* and *ze* have been created as alternatives to *he* and *she* (Scelfo 2015). While queer theory does not focus exclusively on homosexuality, it does examine the dynamics of the relationship between heterosexuals and gay males and lesbians. It is especially concerned with the historic, systematic exercise of power by heterosexuals over gay males and lesbians. For example, gay males and lesbians have often, at least in the past, governed their own behavior in public, such as by foregoing displays of affection, to avoid making heterosexuals uncomfortable.

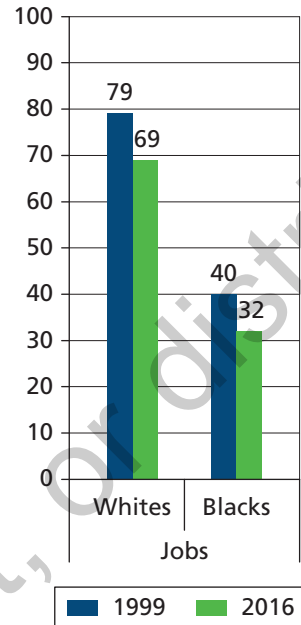
Critical Theories of Race and Racism

Critical theories of race and racism argue that race continues to matter globally and that racism continues to have adverse effects on people of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Slatton and Feagin 2019).

Critical theorists of race argue that “color-blindness,” or the notion that race no longer matters in determining an individual’s life chances and experiences, ignores the past and present realities facing racial minorities. Some suggest that color blindness is little more than a “new racism,” a smoke screen that allows whites to practice and perpetuate racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2009, 2015). See the differing perceptions about employment opportunities illustrated in Figure 2.2, for example. The vast majority of white Americans believe that there is equal employment opportunity, but only a minority of black Americans subscribe to that view. The white belief in the smoke screen of equal opportunity serves to rationalize continued discrimination against blacks.

FIGURE 2.2

Perceptions of Black vs. White Opportunities for Jobs, Housing, and Education



Source: Jeffery M. Jones (15 July 2016). “Americans’ Optimism About Blacks’ Opportunities Wanes.” Gallup. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/193697/americans-optimism-blacks-opportunities-wanes.aspx>.

Of particular importance to recent work in this area is the idea of **intersectionality** (Collins and Bilge 2016), which points to the fact that people are affected, often adversely, not only by their race but also by their gender, sexual orientation, class, age, and global location. The confluence, or intersection, of these various statuses and the inequality and oppression associated with combinations of them are what matter most. Not only are we unable to deal with race, gender, class, and so on separately; we also cannot gain an understanding of oppression by simply adding them together. For example, a poor black female lesbian faces a complex of problems different from, and perhaps more difficult to deal with, than the problems faced by a poor person or a black person or a woman or a lesbian.

ASK YOURSELF

Is your life affected by intersectionality? How many different statuses do you hold, and to which social and cultural groups do you belong?

Postmodern Theory

Postmodern theory has many elements that fit well under the heading of critical theory, although there is more to it than critique. The term *postmodern* is used in various ways in relation to social theory. **Postmodernity**, for instance, is the state of society beyond the “modern era,” which was the era analyzed by the classical social theorists. Among the characteristics of the modern world is rationality, as discussed in Weber’s work. The postmodern world is less rational, nonrational, or even irrational. For example, while in the modern world groups such as the proletariat can plan in a rational manner to overthrow capitalism, in the postmodern world such changes come about accidentally or are simply fated to occur (Baudrillard [1983] 1990; Kellner 2011). Although modernity is characterized by a highly consistent lifestyle, postmodernity is characterized by eclecticism in what we eat, how we dress, and what sorts of music we listen to (Lyotard [1979] 1984). This eclecticism has been fostered by, among others, the internet, which gives people ready access to many more different things (e.g., news, opinion, fashion, music genres) that were not so easily available in the preinternet age.

Postmodern theory is a theoretical orientation that is a reaction against modern theory. It refers to a world that has moved beyond the modern era. Postmodern theorists are opposed to the broad depictions of history and society offered by modern theorists. An example of such a narrative is Weber’s theory of the increasing rationalization of the world and the rise of an “iron cage” constraining our thoughts and activities. Instead, postmodernists often deconstruct, or take apart, modern grand narratives. Postmodernists are also opposed to the scientific pretensions of much modern social theory. They often look at familiar social phenomena in different ways or adopt very

different focuses for their work. For example, in his study of the history of prisons, Michel Foucault ([1975] 1979) was critical of the modernist view that criminal justice had grown progressively liberal. He contended that prisons had, in fact, grown increasingly oppressive through the use of techniques such as constant, enhanced surveillance of prisoners. Similarly, he argued against the traditional view that in the Victorian era people were sexually repressed; he found instead an explosion of sexuality in the Victorian era (Foucault 1978).

Jean Baudrillard described the postmodern world as characterized by **hyperconsumption**, which involves consuming more than we need, more than we really want, and more than we can afford.

Baudrillard also saw the postmodern world as dominated by **simulations**—that is, inauthentic or fake versions of “real” things. For example, when we eat at McDonald’s, we consume Chicken McNuggets, or simulated chicken. It is fake in the sense that it is often not meat from one chicken but bits of meat that come from many different chickens. Simulations characterize Disney World (e.g., Main Street), Las Vegas (the Venetian hotel-casino), and much else in the contemporary world. The idea that we increasingly consume simulations and live a simulated life is a powerful critique of consumer society and, more generally, of the contemporary world. That is, not only are we consuming more, but also much of what we consume is fake.

ASK YOURSELF

Does a life devoted to hyperconsumption, especially online, cause you to become disconnected from others? Are new kinds of human connections created by a common investment in a life devoted to excessive consumption?

Inter/Actionist Theories

The slash between *inter* and *action(ist)* in the heading to this section is meant to communicate the fact that we will deal with two closely related sets of theories here. The first consists of those theories that deal mainly with the interaction of two



This is not New York City but the hotel-casino called New York–New York in Las Vegas, Nevada. One hypothesis of postmodern theory is that we live in a world characterized by an increasing number of simulations of reality. How many others can you think of?

or more people (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and exchange theory). The second comprises those that focus more on the actions of individuals (rational choice theory). A common factor among these theories is that they focus on the micro level of individuals and groups. This is in contrast to the theories discussed previously that focus on the macro structures of society.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is concerned with the interaction of two or more people through the use of symbols (Quist-Adade 2018). Interaction is clear enough. We all engage in interaction with many others on a daily basis, whether it be face-to-face or more indirectly via cell phone, e-mail, or social media. But interaction could not take place without symbols: words, gestures, internet memes (Benaim 2018), and even objects that stand for things. Symbols allow the communication of meaning among a group of people.

Although we can interact with one another without words, such as through physical gestures like the shrug of a shoulder, in the vast majority of cases we need and use words to interact.

Symbolic interactionism has several basic principles:

- Human beings have a great capacity for thought, which differentiates them from lower animals. That innate capacity for thought is greatly shaped by social interaction. It is during social interaction that people acquire the symbolic meanings that allow them to exercise their distinctive ability to think. Those symbolic meanings in turn allow people to act and interact in ways that lower animals cannot.
- Symbolic meanings are not set in stone. People are able to modify them based on a given situation and their interpretation of it.

The Christian cross, for example, is a symbol whose meaning can vary. Christians throughout the world define it in positive religious ways, but many in the Islamic world view it as a negative symbol. Muslims associate the cross with the medieval Crusades waged against their world by the Christian West.

- People are able to modify symbolic meanings because of their unique ability to think. Symbolic interactionists frame *thinking* as people's ability to interact with themselves. In that interaction with themselves, people are able to alter symbolic meanings. They are also able to examine various courses of action open to them in given situations, to assess the relative advantages and disadvantages of each, and then to choose among them.
- It is the pattern of those choices of individual action and interaction that is the basis of groups, larger structures such as bureaucracies, and society as a whole. Most generally, in this theoretical perspective, symbolic interaction is the basis of everything else in the social world.

While symbolic interactionists deal primarily with interaction, they are also concerned with mental processes, such as mind and self, that are deeply implicated in those processes.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology is another inter/actionist theory, but it focuses on what people *do* rather than on what they think (Liu 2012). Ethnomethodologists study the ways in which people organize everyday life.

Ethnomethodologists regard people's lives and social worlds as practical accomplishments that are really quite extraordinary. For example, one ethnomethodological study of coffee drinkers attempted to understand their participation in a subculture of coffee connoisseurship (Manzo 2010). Learning to enjoy coffee is something of an accomplishment itself; taking that enjoyment to the next level and becoming a connoisseur requires even more doing.

Their view of large-scale social structures differs from that of structural-functionalists, who tend to see people and their actions as being highly constrained by those structures. Ethnomethodologists argue that this view tells us very little about what really goes on within structures such as courtrooms, hospitals, and police departments. Rather than being constrained, people act within these structures and go about much of their business using common sense rather than official procedures.

The best-known example of an ethnomethodological approach relates to gender (O'Brien 2016; Stokoe 2006). Ethnomethodologists point out that people often erroneously think of gender as being biologically based. It is generally assumed that we do not have to do or say anything in order to be considered masculine or feminine; we are born that way. But, in fact, there are things we all do (e.g., the way we walk) and say (e.g., the tone of our voice) that allow us to accomplish being masculine or feminine. That is, being masculine or feminine is based on what people do on a regular basis. This is clearest in the case of those who are defined as being male or female at birth (based on biological characteristics) but then later do and say things that lead others to see them as belonging to the other gender (based on social characteristics).

Exchange Theory

Like ethnomethodologists, exchange theorists are not concerned with what goes on in people's minds and how that affects behavior. Instead, they are interested in the behavior itself and the rewards and costs associated with it (Molm, Whithama, and Melamed 2012). The key figure in **exchange theory**, George Homans (1910–1989), argued that instead of studying large-scale structures, sociologists should study the “elementary forms of social life” (Homans 1961, 13).

Exchange theorists are particularly interested in social behavior that usually involves two or more people and a variety of tangible and intangible exchanges. For example, you can reward someone who does you a favor with a tangible gift or with more intangible words of praise. Those exchanges are not always rewarding; they also can be punitive. You could, for example, punish someone who wrongs you by slapping him or complaining about him to mutual acquaintances.

While exchange theory retains an interest in the elementary forms of social behavior, over the years it has grown more concerned with how those forms lead to more complex social situations. That is, individual exchanges can become stable over time and develop into persistent **exchange relationships**. One particular type of exchange relationship is “hooking up,” or forming sexual relationships that are also sometimes called “friends with benefits.” For example, because you and another person find your initial sexual interactions rewarding, you may develop a pattern of repeat interactions (also known as “hookups” or “booty calls”). Exchange relationships, including hookups, rarely develop in isolation from other exchange relationships. Sociologists study how hooking up is not an isolated occurrence—it happens within the context of college campuses, for example, where it has been normalized (Kuperberg and Padgett 2015).

Rational Choice Theory

In **rational choice theory** people are regarded as rational, but the focus is not on exchange, rewards, and costs. Rather, the focus is on people who have goals and intend to do certain things. To achieve their goals, people have a variety of

means available to them and choose among the available means on a rational basis. They choose the means that are likely to best satisfy their needs and wants; in other words, they choose on the basis of “utility” (Kroneberg and Kalter 2012). In the case of hookups, for example, we can easily imagine a series of potential purposes for hooking up, such as engaging in sexual exploration, having fun, and doing something sexual without the risk of getting deeply involved emotionally or getting hurt.

Rational choice theorists understand that people do not always act rationally. They argue, however, that their predictions will generally hold despite these occasional deviations (Coleman 1990; Zafirovski 2013). The degree to which people act rationally is one of the many topics that can be, and has been, researched by sociologists. It is to the general topic of sociological research that we turn in the next section.

Researching the Social World

Sociology is a science of the social world, and research is absolutely central to such a science. All sociologists study others’ research, and most do research of their own. Sociologists may theorize, speculate, and even rely on their imaginations for answers to questions about society. However, they almost always do so on the basis of data or information derived from research. Put another way, sociologists practice **empiricism**, which means that they gather information and evidence using their senses, especially their eyes and ears. Because we all do that in order to experience the world, what makes sociology different? In addition to using their senses, sociologists adopt the scientific method, or a similarly *systematic* approach, in search of a thorough understanding of the social world. They have a variety of methods at their disposal in researching and analyzing society, but they also experience a few significant constraints on their ability to conduct such research.

The Scientific Method

The **scientific method** is a structured way of finding answers to questions about the world (Carey 2011).

The scientific method employed by sociologists is much the same as that used in other sciences. Although in practice creative sociological research often does not slavishly adhere to the following steps, they constitute the basic scientific method:

1. A sociologist uncovers questions in need of answers. These questions can be inspired by key issues in the larger society, personal experiences, or topics of concern specifically in sociology. The best and most durable research and findings often stem from issues that the researcher connects with personally. Karl Marx, for example, detested the exploitation of workers that characterized capitalism; Max Weber feared the depersonalizing impact of bureaucracies.
2. Sociologists review the relevant literature on the questions of interest to them. This is because others have likely done similar or related research in the past. After more than a century of doing scientific research, sociologists have learned a great deal about many things. It would make no sense to start over from the beginning. For example, Ritzer’s (2019) work on McDonaldization is based on the study of the work on rationalization by Max Weber ([1921] 1968), his successors (such as Kalberg 1980), and more contemporary researchers. Other scholars have since reviewed his work and that of other scholars of McDonaldization (for a collection of this work, see Ritzer 2010c). They have amplified the concept and applied it to domains such as religion (Drane 2008), higher education (Hayes 2017; Hayes and Wynyard 2002), social work (Dustin 2007), psychotherapy (Goodman 2016), and Disney World (Bryman 2004; Huddleston, Garlen, and Sandlin 2016). The ideas associated with McDonaldization have also been used as a way of teaching Max Weber’s complex theories to undergraduates (Aldrich and Lippmann 2018).
3. Researchers often develop hypotheses, or educated guesses, about how social phenomena can be expected to relate to one

another. Uri Ram (2007) hypothesized that Israeli society would grow increasingly McDonaldized, and he found evidence to support that idea. Marx hypothesized that the conflict between capitalists and workers would ultimately lead to the collapse of capitalism. However, capitalism has not collapsed, although it came close in 1929 at the beginning of the Great Depression and maybe in 2008 at the onset of the Great Recession. This makes it clear that hypotheses may not be confirmed by research or borne out by social developments, but such speculation is important to the scientific method.

4. Researchers must choose research methods that will help them answer their research questions. Sociology offers diverse methodological tools; some are better than others for answering certain kinds of questions. For example, some sociologists are interested in how a person's social class shapes his or her opinions about social issues. Surveys and other quantitative tools may be best to evaluate the relationship between class and attitudes. Other sociologists want to know how people interpret and make sense of their social world, and how this meaning-making shapes social action. Qualitative methods, such as observations and interviews, may be helpful for studying these issues.
5. Researchers use their chosen methods to collect data that can confirm—or fail to confirm—their hypotheses. Most contemporary sociologists venture into the field to collect original data through observations, interviews, questionnaires, and other means.
6. Researchers analyze the data collected, assessing their meaning in light of the hypotheses that guided the research. For example, Émile Durkheim hypothesized that those who were involved with other people would be less likely to commit suicide than those who lived more isolated existences and were experiencing what he called anomie. Analyzing data from several nineteenth-century European

countries, Durkheim ([1897] 1951) found that the suicide rates were, in fact, higher for widowed or divorced people than for those who were married and therefore presumably better integrated socially.

Sociological Research

Sociological knowledge is derived from research that may use a variety of different methods. Typically, the method chosen is and should be driven by the nature of the research question. Imagine that you are a sociologist interested in studying differences in the behavior of people who visit Las Vegas. You might start by observing, perhaps by watching people gamble. You might look for variations: Are men and women equally represented at the slot machines? Are they equally likely to play craps or blackjack? Are there age differences in who plays which games? You could do much the same thing in looking for differences among those who attend the shows and musical events at the casinos. Are there gender differences between the Las Vegas audiences of, say, Cirque du Soleil's *Mystère* or *Zumanity* and the audiences of the music of Barry Manilow or a Penn & Teller magic show? Are there age differences between the audience members at a Carrot Top show and those at a Mariah Carey concert? To better understand such differences, you might be inspired to participate, to become a *participant observer*, gambling or being entertained alongside those you are studying.

You may realize that your specific research questions are better answered through use of the interview method. You might interview those who have come to Las Vegas to gamble, asking about their expectations for having fun or winning a lot of money. Or, you might administer an anonymous questionnaire or survey to find out how much money people who gamble have lost.

You could also create an experiment. Using a social science lab at your university, you could set up a Las Vegas-style poker table and recruit students as participants. You could tell them that the typical player loses 90 percent of the time and that previous research has shown that *most* players lose *most of the time*. You could then ask whether, in spite of that information, they still want to gamble at your poker table. Of greatest interest would be those who say yes. You could interview



Observation is a primary method in sociological research. Do you think people behave differently when they know they are being observed?

them before they start “gambling” at your table, observe them as they gamble, and interview them again after they finish gambling. Did they start out believing, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that they would win? How could they have retained such a belief in spite of all the counterevidence? What are their feelings after gambling at your table? Did those feelings seem to be related to whether they won or lost? How likely are they to gamble again? Are there important differences between women and men in terms of their answers to these questions?

Observation, interviews, surveys, experiments, and other research methods are all useful and important to sociologists. All have strengths but also limitations. Before we examine these methods in more detail, there is an important distinction between two basic types of research methods that should be clarified.

Qualitative and Quantitative Research

The wide variety of research methods available to sociologists can be classified as either qualitative or quantitative.

Qualitative research consists of studies done in natural settings that produce in-depth, descriptive information (e.g., in respondents’ own

words) about the social world (Denzin 2018; Silverman 2016). Such research does not necessarily require statistical methods for collecting and reporting data (Marshall and Rossman 2010). Observation—watching, listening, and taking detailed notes—and open-ended interviews are just two of the qualitative methods used by sociologists. Because qualitative methods usually rely on small sample sizes, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population; for this, we use quantitative methods.

Quantitative research involves the analysis of numerical data, usually derived from surveys and experiments (Schutt, 2019), to better understand important empirical social realities. The mathematical method used to analyze numerical data is **statistics**. It is a powerful tool, and most sociological researchers learn statistical methods. Statistics can aid researchers in two ways. When researchers want to see trends over time or compare differences between groups, they use **descriptive statistics**. The purpose of such statistics is to *describe* some particular body of data that is based on a phenomenon in the real world. To test hypotheses, researchers use **inferential statistics**. Such statistics allow researchers to use data from a relatively small group to speculate with some level of certainty about a larger group. While such data allow researchers to make broad generalizations, they do not provide insight into people’s lived experiences and interpretation of particular issues and events. Each method has its own set of strengths and limitations in terms of what it can do to help a researcher answer a specific question. Sociologists often debate the relative merits of quantitative versus qualitative methods, but they generally recognize that each method has value. There is a broad consensus that quantitative and qualitative research methods can complement one another (Creswell and Creswell 2018). In practice, sociologists (and other social scientists) may conduct mixed-methods research

by combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study (Reich and Bearman 2018).

Observational Research

Observation is a qualitative method consisting of systematically watching, listening to, and recording what takes place in a natural social setting over some, usually extended, period of time. Though the observational techniques of sociologists are similar to those used by investigative journalists, sociological techniques may be much more systematic and in-depth. The two primary observational methods are participant and nonparticipant observation.

Participant and Nonparticipant Observation

In **participant observation** the researcher actually plays a role, even a minor one, in the group or setting being observed. A participant observer might become a hostess or bartender to study the sex industry in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (Hoang 2015), sell books on the sidewalk to watch what happens on a busy city street (Duneier 1999), or live in a trailer park to witness how individuals cope with poverty (Desmond 2016; see the Trending box in Chapter 7, page 192). Aasha Abdill (2018) spent four years studying black fathers in a low-income area of Brooklyn, discovering that they are present in their children's daily lives despite high rates of unemployment and incarceration. CNN's *Somebody's Gotta Do It* is essentially an informal exercise in the participant observation of work. The host, Mike Rowe, is *not* a trained sociologist and he is *not* trying, at least consciously, to uncover the sociological aspects of the jobs he studies, but he *is* a participant observer. In each episode, he actually does the job being examined—he is a participant—and he observes the workers as well as their dirty jobs. Among the jobs Rowe has performed and observed on the show are “turd burner,” owl vomit collector, baby chicken sexer, sheep castrator, rat exterminator, maggot farmer, diaper cleaner, and high-rise building window washer.

ASK YOURSELF

Do you think participant observers risk losing their objectivity when they grow too close to the subjects under study? Why or why not? What about nonparticipant observers? How can sociologists conducting observational research avoid becoming too involved with subjects?

In **nonparticipant observation** the sociologist plays little or no role in what is being observed. Gary Fine has done nonparticipant observation research on Little League baseball (Fine 1987), restaurant kitchens (Fine 2008), meteorologists (Fine 2010), and chess players involved in a chess tournament (Fine 2015).

There are no firm dividing lines between participant and nonparticipant observation, and at times the two blend imperceptibly into one another. The participant often becomes simply an observer. An example is the sociologist who begins with participant observation of a gang, hanging out with members in casual settings, but becomes a nonparticipant when illegal activities such as drug deals take place. And the nonparticipant observer sometimes becomes a participant. An example is the sociologist who is unable to avoid being asked to take sides or share opinions in squabbles among members of a Little League team or, more likely, among their parents.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the creation of a detailed account of what a group of people do and the way they live, usually entailing much more intensive, immersive, and lengthy periods of observation (sometimes participant) than traditional sociological observation requires. Researchers may live for years with the groups, tribes, or subcultures (such as gamblers) being studied. Normally ethnographies are small in scale, micro, and local. Researchers observe people, talk to them, hang out with them, sometimes live with them, and conduct formal and informal interviews with them over an extended period of time.

The ethnographic method has now been extended to the global level. Michael Burawoy



Interviews and observation are among the tools of ethnographic research. Here an ethnographer visits members of an indigenous tribe in Papua New Guinea.

(2000; see also Kenway and McCarthy 2016; Tsuda, Tapias, and Escandell 2014) argues that a **global ethnography** is the best way to understand globalization. This type of ethnography is grounded in various parts of the world and seeks to understand globalization as it exists in people's social lives.

Digital Living: Netnography

The basic concerns of sociology—communications, relationships, and groups—are key elements of the internet, especially social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Online discussions, digital networking, and posting photos and videos are how many of us connect virtually with each other every day. Not surprisingly, **netnography**, or an account of what transpires online, has become an important method of sociological research (Kozinets 2015; Quinton 2018). Netnographers are digital ethnographers who are able to observe thousands of phenomena online. For example, they might follow the Twitter account of a celebrity or sports star to learn about their fans or play an online video game such as World of Warcraft to understand how individuals engage in virtual role-playing and collaboration. One recent study used netnography to examine the blogs of female Chinese tourists in Macao, discovering how crossing the border influenced perceptions of their

self-identity and enhanced their personal relationships (Zhang and Hitchcock 2014). Outside of academia, netnography is used by web designers, marketers, and advertisers to observe, record, and analyze our digital behaviors. The virtual data we create when shopping on Zappos or streaming music on Spotify offer these professionals valuable information that they can use to entice us to buy more products or visit new websites.

Netnography, like other social research, raises ethical questions. Researchers who join an internet community to observe its ongoing communications might not inform other members that they have joined with the objective of studying the group. The issue of informed consent is especially ambiguous when conducting online research because so much of what transpires in virtual reality is public. While we can take steps to protect our privacy online, many of us do not. For some internet users, the whole point of posting a video on YouTube or writing a blog is to attract as many views and followers as possible. Revealing personal information about ourselves, family, and friends is common on popular social media sites. This makes it easy for anyone, including social researchers, to investigate our relationships and identities.

Interviews

While observers often interview those they are studying, they usually do so very informally and on the spur of the moment. Other sociologists rely mainly, or exclusively, on **interviews** in which they seek information from participants (respondents) by asking a series of questions that have been spelled out, at least to some degree, before the research is conducted (Gubrium et al. 2012). Interviews are usually conducted face-to-face, although they can be done by phone and are increasingly being done via the internet (James 2016). In addition, large-scale national surveys are



Interviews can take many forms and be more or less structured, depending on the researcher's needs. Here an interviewer stops a passerby.

increasingly including interviews. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is known for its national surveys, but it also uses interviews in its National Health Interview Survey, which has been conducted continuously since 1957 (Sirkin et al. 2011; see www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis/about_nhis.htm).

The use of interviews has a long history in sociology. One very early example is W. E. B. Du Bois's ([1899] 1996) study of the "Philadelphia Negro." A watershed in the history of interviewing in sociology was reached during World War II, when large-scale interview studies of members of the American military were conducted. Some of the data from those studies were reported in a landmark study, *The American Soldier* (Stouffer et al. 1949). More recently, Robert Wuthnow (2018) and his research assistants conducted over 1,000 in-depth interviews with individuals residing in rural communities to learn about how their norms, values, and local experiences are changing (see Trending box, Chapter 3).

Types of Interviews

The questions asked in an interview may be preselected and prestructured so that respondents

must choose from sets of preselected answers such as *agree* and *disagree*. Or an interview may be more spontaneous, unstructured, and completely open-ended. The latter form is used by those who do observational research. An unstructured interview offers no preset answers; respondents are free to say anything they want.

Prestructured interviews are attractive when the researcher wants to avoid any unanticipated reactions or responses from those being studied. In a prestructured interview, the interviewer attempts to

- Behave in the same way in each interview
- Ask the same questions, using the same exact words, and in the same sequence
- Ask closed-ended questions that the participant must answer by choosing from a set of preselected responses
- Offer the same explanations when they are requested by respondents
- Not show any kind of reaction to the answers, no matter what they might be

Interviews conducted in this way often yield information that, like data obtained from questionnaires, can be coded numerically and then analyzed statistically.

There are problems associated with prestructured interviews. First, interviewers often find it difficult to live up to the guidelines for such interviews:

- They are frequently unable to avoid reacting to answers (especially unexpected or outrageous ones).
- They may use different intonation from one interview to another.

- They may change the wording, and even the order, of the questions asked (which can affect respondents' answers).

Another problem is that respondents may not respond accurately or truthfully. For example, they may want to conceal things or give answers they believe the interviewer wants to hear. Finally, and most importantly, closed-ended questions limit the responses, possibly cutting off useful unanticipated information that might be provided in a more free-flowing interview.

The last problem is solved by the use of open-ended or *unstructured interviews*. The interviewer begins with only a general idea of the topics to be covered and the direction to be taken in the interview. The answers in unstructured interviews offer a good understanding of the respondents and what the issues under study mean to them. Such understandings and meanings are generally not obtained through structured interviews. However, unstructured interviews create problems of their own. For example, they may yield so much diverse information that it is hard to offer a coherent summary and interpretation of the results.

The Interview Process

Conducting interviews, especially those that are prestructured, usually involves several steps:

1. The interviewer must *gain access* to the setting being studied. This is relatively easy in some cases, such as when interviewing one's friends in the student union or at a local bar. However, access would likely be much more difficult if one wanted to interview one's friends in a sorority house or on the job. People might be less eager to talk to a researcher—to any outsider—in such settings.
2. The interviewer must often seek to *locate a key informant* (Brown, Bankston, and Forsyth 2013; Rieger 2007). This is a person who has intimate knowledge of the group being studied and is willing to talk openly to the researcher about the group. A key informant can help the researcher gain access to the larger group of respondents and verify information being provided by them.

3. The interviewer must seek to *understand the language and culture* of the people being interviewed. In some cases this is very easy. For example, it is not a great problem for an academic interviewer to understand the language and culture of college students. However, it is more difficult if the academician interviews people with their own, very different language and culture. Examples might include interviews with members of motorcycle gangs or prostitutes. In these kinds of cases, it is all too easy for the researcher to misunderstand or to impose incorrect meanings on the words of respondents.

4. The researcher must *gain the trust of the respondents and develop a rapport* with them. Establishing trust and rapport can be easy or difficult, depending on the characteristics of the researcher and the respondents. Well-educated and relatively powerful male researchers may intimidate less privileged female respondents. Older researchers may have trouble interviewing traditional-age college students. Depending on the field site, a researcher's point of view and (perceived) similarities with the respondents may increase rapport.

ASK YOURSELF

Have you ever conducted or participated in an interview, perhaps for a job or as part of a study? How closely did it adhere to the guidelines mentioned here?

Survey Research

Survey research involves the collection of information from a population, or more usually a representative portion of a population, through the use of interviews and, most important, questionnaires. While some sociologists do their own surveys, most rely on data derived from surveys done by others, such as the U.S. government (the U.S. census, for example) and the National Opinion Research Center, which conducts various opinion polls.

Most survey research relies on **questionnaires** which are self-administered, written sets of questions. While the questions can be presented to respondents face-to-face, they are more often delivered to them by mail, asked over the telephone, or presented in a web-based format. Questionnaires are now increasingly being filled out on personal computers and over the phone (Snyder 2007).

Types of Surveys

There are two broad types of surveys. A **descriptive survey** is designed to gather accurate information about, for example, members of a certain group, people in a given geographic area, or people in a particular organization. The best-known descriptive surveys are those conducted by organizations such as Gallup to gather information on the preferences, beliefs, and attitudes of given samples of people.

ASK YOURSELF

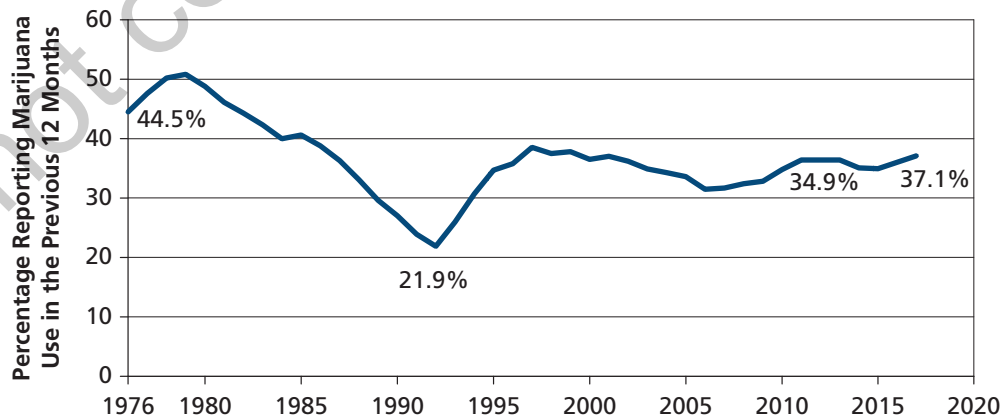
Has the increasing legalization of marijuana throughout the United States altered the data on marijuana use among high school seniors? Why or why not? How might any change affect data on the use of other drugs?

For many years, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan has conducted a descriptive survey of high school seniors in the United States. One of the subjects has been marijuana use. As you can see in Figure 2.3, the prevalence of marijuana use among high school seniors has risen and fallen, as if in waves. Marijuana use in this group peaked in 1979 (with more than half of students admitting use of the drug), reached a low of 22 percent in 1992, and has generally risen since then, although it has never again approached the 1979 level. In 2017, 37 percent of twelfth graders reported having used marijuana in the previous 12 months.

The data in Figure 2.3 are derived from descriptive surveys, but what if we wanted to explain, and not just statistically describe, changes in marijuana use among high school seniors? To get at this, we would need to do an **explanatory survey**, which seeks to uncover potential causes of, in this case, changes in marijuana use (e.g., the legalization of marijuana in states such as Colorado, California, and Maine [Monte, Zane, and Heard 2015]). For example, having discovered variations in marijuana use by high school students over the years, we might hypothesize that the variation is linked to students' (and perhaps the general public's) changing perceptions about the riskiness

FIGURE 2.3

Marijuana Use Among U.S. High School Seniors, 1976–2017



Source: Data from Lloyd D. Johnston, Patrick O'Malley, Richard A. Miech, Jerald G. Bachman, and John E. Schulenberg, Monitoring the Future: National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975–2017: Overview, Key Findings on Adolescent Drug Use, Table 6 (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 2017).

of marijuana use. Specifically, we might hypothesize that as students (and the public) increasingly come to see marijuana as less risky, marijuana use among students will go up. In this case, we would use the survey to learn more about respondents' attitudes toward and beliefs about the riskiness of marijuana use and not simply measure student use of marijuana.

Sampling

It is almost never possible to survey an entire population, such as all Americans, all students at your college or university, or even all sorority members at that university. Thus, survey researchers usually need to construct a **sample**, or a representative portion of the overall population. The more careful the researcher is in avoiding biases in selecting the sample, the more likely the findings are to be representative of the whole group.

The most common way to avoid bias is to create a **random sample**, a sample in which every member of the group has an equal chance of being included. One way of obtaining a random sample is by using a list—for example, a list of the names of all the professors at your university. A coin is tossed for each name on the list, and those professors for whom the toss results in heads are included in the sample. More typical and efficient is the use of random number tables, found in most statistics textbooks, to select those in the sample (Kirk 2007). In our example, each professor is assigned a number, and those whose numbers come up in the random number table are included in the sample. More recently, use is being made of computer-generated random numbers.

Other sampling techniques are used in survey research as well. For example, the researcher might create a **stratified sample** in which a larger group is divided into a series of subgroups (e.g., assistant, associate, and full professors) and then random samples are taken within each of these groups. This ensures representation from each group in the final sample, something that might not occur if one simply does a random sample of the larger group.

Random and stratified sampling are the safest ways of drawing accurate conclusions about a population as a whole. However, there is an element

of chance in all sampling, especially random sampling, with the result that findings can vary from one sample to another. Even though sampling is the safest way to reach conclusions about a population, errors are possible. Random and stratified sampling are depicted in Figure 2.4.

Sometimes researchers use **convenience samples**, which avoid systematic sampling and simply include those who are conveniently available to participate in a research project. An example of a convenience sample might involve researchers passing out surveys to the students in their classes (Lunneborg 2007). These non-random samples are rarely ever representative of the larger population whose opinions the researcher is interested in knowing. Nonrandom samples therefore may create a substantial bias in researchers' results (Popham and Sirotnik 1973). Many surveys that pop up on the internet are suspect because the respondents are the people who happened to be at a certain website (which is likely to reflect their interests) and who felt strongly enough about the topic of the survey to answer the questions.

Research using convenience samples is usually only exploratory. It is almost impossible to draw any definitive conclusions from such research. There are, however, some cases (e.g., studying a group in which many members are reluctant to be studied) in which convenience sampling is not only justified but also necessary and useful. Convenience sampling also sometimes leads to larger, more scientific projects that rely on random or stratified samples.

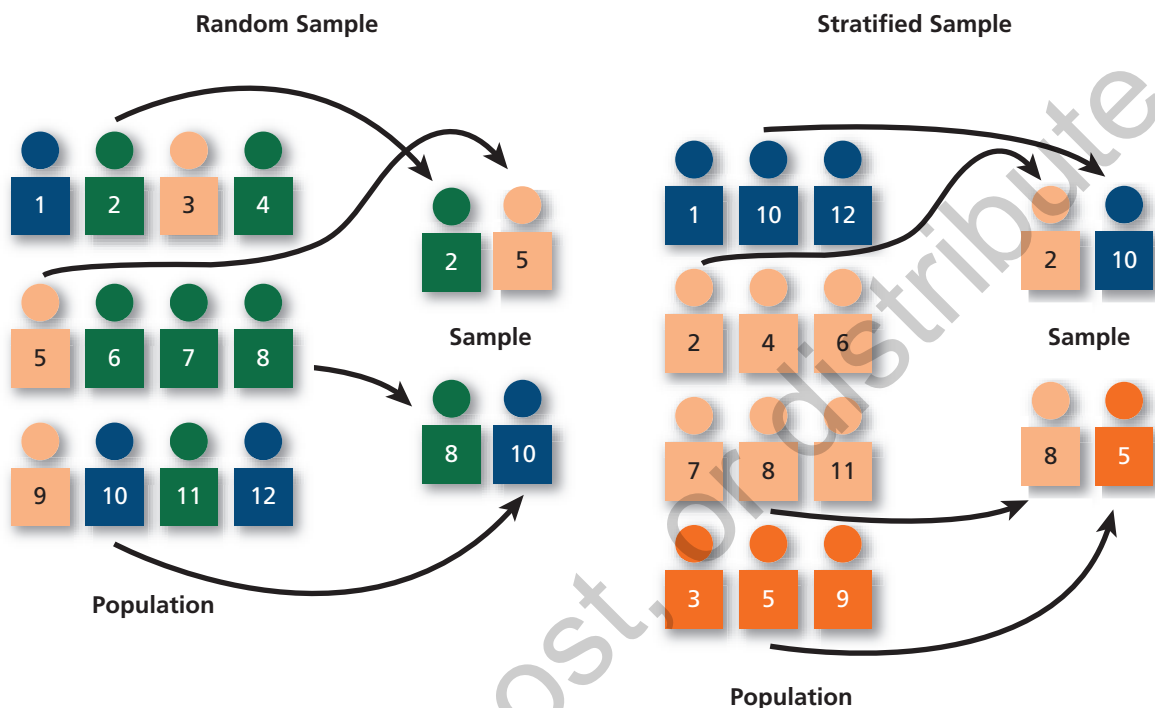
Experiments

Some sociologists perform experiments (Jackson and Cox 2013). An **experiment** involves the manipulation of one or more characteristics in order to examine the effect of that manipulation (Kirk 2007).

A study by Devah Pager (2009) is a good example of a sociological experiment. Pager was interested in how the background of a job applicant affects the likelihood of that individual's being called back for an interview. Pager randomly assigned fake criminal records to pairs of similar young men, one in each pair black and one white. Thus, in each pair, one person had a criminal record and one did not, and one was white and

FIGURE 2.4

Random Samples and Stratified Samples



Source: Random Samples and Stratified Samples is reprinted with permission of Dan Kernler, Associate Professor of Mathematics, Elgin Community College, Elgin, IL.

one was not. These young men then sent résumés to companies in Milwaukee, seeking entry-level jobs. One major finding of this experiment was that the young men believed to have criminal records received callbacks less than half as often as did those of the same race believed not to have criminal records.

In this experiment, we can clearly see the relationship between two important elements of an experiment: independent and dependent variables. In Pager's experiment, the **independent variable**, the condition that was manipulated by the researcher, was the job applicant's combination of race and criminal background. The **dependent variable**, the characteristic or measurement that resulted from the manipulation, was whether the applicant was called in for an interview.

There are several types of experiments (Walker and Willer 2007):

- *Laboratory experiments.* **Laboratory experiments** take place in controlled settings. The “laboratory” may be, for example, a classroom or a simulated environment. The setting offers the researcher great control over the selection of the participants as well as the independent variables—the conditions to which the participants are exposed (Lucas, Graif, and Lovaglia 2008).
- *Natural experiments.* **Natural experiments** are those in which researchers take advantage of a naturally occurring event to study its effect on one or more dependent variables. Such experiments offer the experimenter little or no control over independent variables (De Silva et al. 2010). For example, a natural experiment at

Harvard University assigned first-year students from different races as roommates. Among the findings was that breakups among the roommates were more likely when an East Asian student lived with two white students (Chakravarti, Menon, and Winship 2014).

- *Field experiments.* In some natural situations, researchers are able to exert at least some control over who participates and what happens during experiments (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Pager and Western 2012). These are called **field experiments**. One of the most famous studies in the history of sociology is the “Robbers Cave” field experiment (Sherif et al. [1954] 1961), so called because it took place in Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma. The researchers controlled important aspects of what took place at the site. For example, they were able to assign the 22 boys in the study into two groups, called the Rattlers and the Eagles. The researchers were also able to create various situations that led to rivalry, bickering, and hostility between the groups. At the end of the experiment, they had each group rate the other: 53 percent of ratings of the Eagles were unfavorable, while nearly 77 percent of ratings of the Rattlers were unfavorable. Later, the researchers introduced conditions they hoped would reduce bad feelings and friction between the groups. In fact, greater harmony between the groups was created by having them work together on tasks such as securing needed water and paying collectively and equitably for a movie that everyone wanted to see. By the end of the latter part of the experiment, just 5 percent of the ratings of the Eagles were unfavorable, and unfavorable ratings of the Rattlers had dropped to 23 percent.
- A more recent field experiment in Sweden dealt, in part, with hiring discrimination against ethnic groups (Bursell 2014). Pairs of equally qualified applicants were sent to interview for open jobs. Those with Arabic or North African names were less likely to be called back for additional consideration.

Secondary Data Analysis

All of the methods discussed thus far involve the collection of new and original data, but many sociologists engage in **secondary data analysis**, in which they reanalyze data collected by others. Secondary analysis can involve a wide variety of different types of data, from censuses and other surveys to historical records and old transcripts of interviews and focus groups. Until recently, obtaining and using some of these secondary data sets was laborious and time-consuming. Today, however, thousands of data sets are available online, and they can be accessed with a few keystrokes. A number of websites provide both the data sets and statistical software for looking at them in different ways (Quinton 2018).

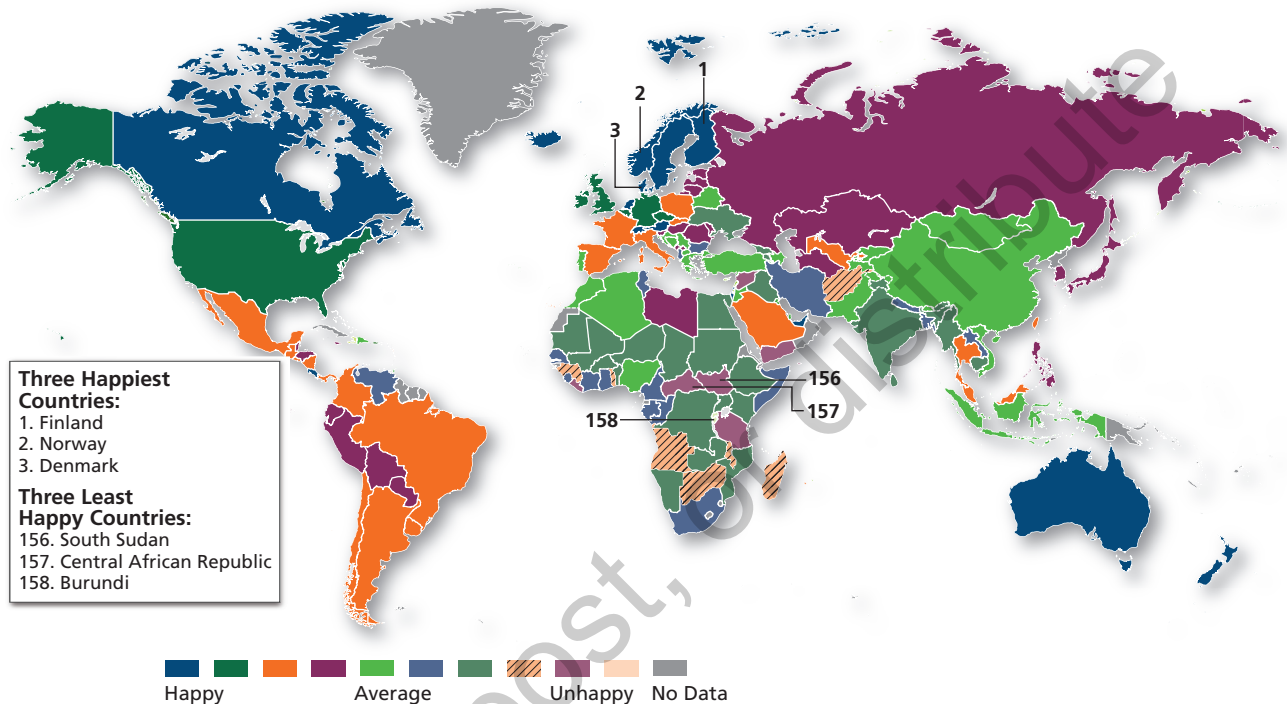
Secondary data analysis very often involves statistical analysis of government surveys and census data. For example, researchers studying multi-racial identity used data from the 2000 and 2010 censuses and found that individuals who identified as two or more races increased from 6.8 million in 2000 to 9 million in 2010 (Jones and Bullock 2013). It is not unusual for one body of data to lead to hundreds of secondary analyses. For example, the World Values Survey (WVS; www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp) is conducted in nearly 100 countries containing almost 90 percent of the world’s population. Its seven waves have been used to produce more than 1,000 research publications in more than 20 languages. Some of this research has used the WVS to examine what social, cultural, and economic factors contribute to an individual’s happiness. Figure 2.5 shows a “happiness map” depicting levels of happiness among the citizens of various countries included in the surveys from 2010 to 2018.

Historical-Comparative Method

The goal of **historical-comparative research** is to contrast how different historical events and conditions in various societies have led to different societal outcomes. The historical component involves the study of the history of societies as well as of their major components, such as the state, religious system, and economy. The addition of the comparative element, comparing the histories of two or more societies, or of

FIGURE 2.5

World Happiness Ranking of 158 Countries



Source: John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey Sachs, eds. 2018. *World Happiness Report 2018*. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

components of societies, makes this method more distinctively sociological.

Historians go into much more detail, and collect far more original historical data, than do sociologists. In contrast, sociologists are much more interested in generalizing about society than are historians. Weber did historical comparative research in analyzing the relationship between world religions and the development of capitalism. More recent instances of historical-comparative research have covered a wide range of issues, but one of the most popular topics has been examining the relationship between the state and war (Skocpol 1979; Rodriguez-Franco 2016).

Some scholars have combined the use of other methods with historical-comparative analysis to generate important theoretical insights about more contemporary issues. For example, Piketty

(2014) examined a variety of statistical data to uncover the historical changes of income and wealth inequality in Europe and the United States. He found that inequality has been produced and reproduced over time due to the concentration of wealth in the upper class. The concentration of wealth was quite high in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in the United States in the decades before the Great Depression but leveled off during and after World War II due to inflation, higher taxes, and the policies of the modern welfare state. However, near the end of the twentieth century the concentration of wealth (and income) started to increase dramatically when inherited wealth, in particular, began to grow faster than economic output and income (Piketty 2014). If we aspire to a more egalitarian society, Piketty suggests that states implement a global tax on wealth.

Content Analysis

Another type of secondary analysis, called **content analysis**, relies on the systematic and objective analysis of the content of cultural artifacts in print, visual, audio, and digital media, including photographs, movies, advertisements, speeches, and newspaper articles (Wolff 2007). The goal is to use qualitative and especially quantitative methods to understand the content of messages. In one well-known study, Herbert Gans (1979) did a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of news on television and in newsmagazines to identify patterns in the reporting of news. For example, he found that well-known people were dealt with much more frequently than were unknowns. Among non-war-related stories, government conflicts and disagreements were more likely to be dealt with than were government decisions.

Gans's content analysis took as its focus the overt content of the news, but it is also possible to use content analysis to analyze other issues, such as gender inequality. For example, researchers performed a content analysis of 1,245 characters on 89 prime-time television programs, finding that though some gender stereotypes have declined, others, such as dominant men and sexually provocative women, persist (Sink and Mastro 2016). Content analysis is moving beyond traditional media and is now also being conducted on social media. For example, Pilkington and Rominov (2017) researched fathers' worries during their partners' pregnancies by analyzing the content of their posts on Reddit. They found that most fathers-to-be are worried about infant well-being and the potential for prenatal loss.

Issues in Social Research

The research conducted by sociologists raises a number of issues of great importance. These include the reliability and validity of findings and the ethics involved in the research process.

Reliability and Validity

A key issue with sociological data relates to one's ability to trust the findings. **Reliability** involves the degree to which a given question, or another kind of measure, produces the same results time

after time. In other words, would the same question asked one day get the same response from the participants or the same measurement on the scale the following day, or week, or month?

The other dimension of trustworthiness is **validity**, or the degree to which a question, or another kind of measure, gets an accurate response. In other words, does the question measure what it is supposed to measure?

Research Ethics

Ethics is concerned with issues of right and wrong, the choices that people make, and how people justify those choices (Hedgecoe 2016). World War II and the behavior of the Nazis helped make ethics a central issue in research. The Nazis engaged in horrendous medical experiments on inmates in concentration camps. Unethical research was also conducted between 1932 and 1972 at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama on hundreds of poor black American men suffering from syphilis. The researchers were interested in studying the natural progression of the disease over time, but they never told the participants that they were suffering from syphilis. Despite regular visits to collect data from and about the participants, the researchers did not treat them for the disease and allowed them to suffer over long periods of time before they died painfully (Reverby 2009).

A more recent example of questionable research ethics is the case of Henrietta Lacks (Skloot 2011; see also the 2017 HBO movie *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*). Lacks was a poor African American woman who died of cervical cancer in 1951. Without her knowledge or consent, some of her tumor was removed. Cancer cells from that tumor live on today and have spawned much research and even highly successful industries. While those cells have led to a variety of medical advances, a number of ethical issues are raised by what happened to Lacks and subsequently to her family. For example, should the tumor have been removed and its cancer cells reproduced without Lacks and her family knowing about, and approving of, what was intended? Would the same procedures have taken place if Lacks were a well-to-do white woman? Finally, should Lacks's descendants get a portion of the earnings of the industries that have developed on the basis of her cancer cells?



Photo Researchers, Inc. / Alamy Stock Photo

Henrietta Lacks was responsible for major advances in medical science, all without her knowledge or consent. Cells taken during testing while she was undergoing treatment for cervical cancer in 1951 are still used today. Lacks's cells continue to be invaluable to researchers, but should the manner in which they were obtained affect how they are used?

No research undertaken by sociologists has caused anything like the kind of suffering and death experienced by the people studied in Nazi Germany or at Tuskegee Institute, or even generated an ethical firestorm like the one raging around the Lacks case. Nonetheless, such research is the context and background for ethical concerns about the harmful or negative effects of research on participants in sociological research (the code of ethics of the American Sociological Association can be found online at www.asanet.org/about/ethics.cfm). There are three main areas of concern: physical and psychological harm to participants, illegal acts by researchers, and deception and violation of participants' trust.

Physical and Psychological Harm

The first issue, following from the Nazi experiments and Tuskegee studies, is concern over whether research can actually cause participants physical harm. Most sociological research is not likely to cause such harm. However, physical harm may be an unintended consequence. In the Robbers Cave research, discussed earlier as an example of a natural experiment, competition and conflict were engendered between two groups of 12-year-old boys. The hostility reached such a peak that the boys engaged in apple-throwing fights and in raids on one another's compounds.

A much greater issue in sociological research is the possibility of psychological harm to those being studied. Even questionnaire or interview studies can cause psychological harm merely by asking people about sensitive issues such as sexual orientation, drug use, and experience with abortion. This risk is greatly increased when, unbeknownst to the researcher, a participant is hypersensitive to these issues because of a difficult or traumatic personal experience.

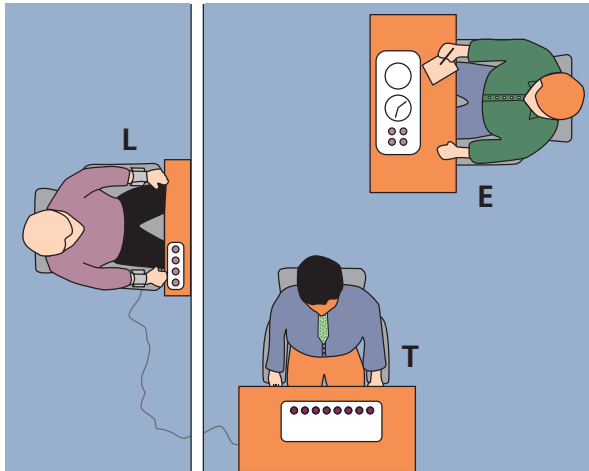
Some of the more extreme risks of psychological harm have occurred in experiments. The most famous example is Stanley Milgram's (1974) laboratory study of how far people will go when they are given orders by those in positions of authority. In it, one group, the "learners," were secretly paid to pretend that painful shocks were being applied to them by the other group of participants, the "teachers," who were led to believe that the shocks they thought they were applying were real (Figure 2.6). The researcher, dressed officially in a white coat and projecting an aura of scientific respectability, ordered the teachers to apply shocks that appeared to be potentially lethal. The teachers did so even though the learners, who were in another room and not visible, were screaming with increasing intensity. The research clearly showed that if they were ordered to do so by authority figures, people would violate the social norms against inflicting pain on, and even possibly endangering the lives of, others.

The results of the Milgram experiment are important in many senses, especially what the study did to the psyches of the people involved. The "teachers" came to know that they were very responsive to the dictates of authority figures,

even if they were ordered to commit immoral acts. Some of them certainly realized that their behavior indicated they were perfectly capable in such circumstances of harming, if not killing, other human

FIGURE 2.6

The Teacher (T), Learner (L), and Experimenter (E) in the Milgram Experiment



beings. Such realizations had the possibility of adversely affecting the way participants viewed, and felt about, themselves. But the research has had several benefits as well, for both participants and others who have read about the Milgram studies. For example, those in powerful positions can better understand, and therefore limit, the potential impact of their orders to subordinates, and subordinates can more successfully limit how far they are willing to go in carrying out the orders of their superiors.

Another famous study that raises similar ethical issues was conducted by Philip Zimbardo (1973). Zimbardo set up a prison like structure called “Stanford County Prison” as a setting in which to conduct his experiment. Participants were recruited to serve as either prisoners or guards. The “prison” was very realistic, with windowless cells, minimal toilet facilities, and strict regulations imposed on the inmates. The guards had uniforms, badges, keys, and clubs. They were also trained in the methods of managing prisoners.

The experiment was supposed to last six weeks, but it was ended after only six days when the researchers grew fearful about the health and sanity of the prisoners, whom some of the guards

insulted, degraded, and dehumanized. Only a few guards were helpful and supportive. However, even the helpful guards refused to intervene when prisoners were being abused. The prisoners could have left, but they tended to go along with the situation, accepting both the authority of the guards and their own lowly and abused position. Some of the guards experienced psychological distress, but it was worse for the prisoners when they realized how much they had contributed to their own difficulties. Social researchers learned that a real or perceived imbalance of power between researcher and participant may lead the participant to comply with a researcher’s demands even though they cause distress.



Philip Zimbardo’s experimental re-creation of prison conditions was so realistic, and the participants were so severely affected by their involvement in it, that the experiment had to be cut short by several weeks. Could this early cutoff have invalidated the research?

ASK YOURSELF

Are there any other ways to answer the questions Milgram and Zimbardo explored? How would you tackle these questions as a social scientist?

Illegal Acts

In the course of ethnographic fieldwork, a researcher might witness or even become entangled in illegal acts. This problem confronted Randol Contreras in his research on a group of Dominican men who robbed upper-level drug dealers in the South Bronx (Contreras 2017). These “stickup kids” engaged in brutal acts of violence and possessed illegal drugs and cash. Contreras, himself a former—though admittedly unsuccessful—drug dealer, had to be careful to avoid participating in illegal activities that the stickup kids were describing to him, particularly because some of them were childhood friends.

In other cases, researchers must weigh sticky legal and ethical ramifications for participants. Publishing an account of such a dramatic act might help the researchers’ careers, but it might also send the perpetrator of the illegal act to jail. It was also possible that not informing the police, or refusing to turn over field notes, could lead to imprisonment for the researchers.

Violation of Trust

Researchers can betray participants’ trust in several ways. For instance, the researcher might inadvertently divulge the identity of respondents even though they were promised anonymity. There is also the possibility of exploitative relationships, especially with key informants. Exploitation is of special concern in cases where there is a real or perceived imbalance of power—often related to race, class, or gender—between researcher and participant. In the Tuskegee case, for example, African American men suffered the adverse effects of the research even though syphilis is distributed throughout the larger population. Although this research should not have occurred under any circumstances, a more equitable research design would have meant that most of the participants were white males.

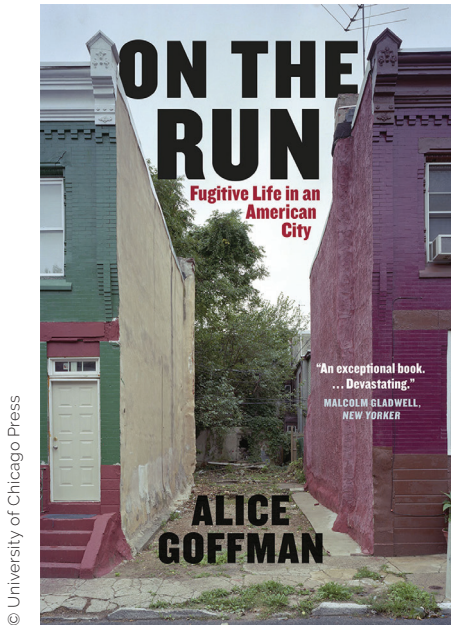
It is also a betrayal of trust for the researcher to develop inappropriate relationships with participants. One noteworthy example of this is a study conducted by Erich Goode (2002) to better understand the stigma of obesity. Goode has publicly acknowledged that he had sexual relations with some of his female informants. He argues that because of this, he was able to obtain information that may not have been obtainable by any other means. However, one must ask about the cost to participants of his obtaining the knowledge in this way. Because Goode’s participants did not have full knowledge of his motives, they were unable to make informed choices about engaging in sexual relations with him. In this case, the power imbalance between researcher and participant led to exploitation.

The best-known example of sociological research involving deception and intrusion into people’s lives is Laud Humphreys’s (1970) study of the homosexual activities of men in public restrooms (“tearooms”). Humphreys (1930–1988) acted as a lookout outside tearooms and signaled men engaged in anonymous acts of fellatio when members of the public or the police were approaching. He interviewed some of the men with full disclosure. However, he also noted the license plate numbers of some of those he observed and tracked down their addresses. Humphreys appeared at their homes a year or so later, in disguise, to interview them under false pretenses. In this way, he uncovered one of the most important findings of his study: More than half the men were married, with wives and families. They were active in the tearoom trade not because they were homosexual but because sexual relations in their marriages were problematic.

Humphreys deceived these men by not telling them from the outset that he was doing research on them and, with those he interviewed under false pretenses, by not revealing the true nature of the research. His research had at least the potential of revealing something that most of the participants wanted to conceal. He later admitted that if he had the chance to do the research over again, he would tell the participants about his true role and goal. But the research itself is not without merit. It helped distinguish between same-sex acts and gay identity. It provided much-needed insight into the social construction of sexuality and the difficulties involved in understanding how people develop their sexual selves.

On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City (University of Chicago Press, 2014)

Alice Goffman



Maintaining a certain level of objectivity and distance from the individuals one is researching can prove challenging, especially when one is immersed in their daily lives for an extended time. Ethical dilemmas can arise when researchers empathize too much with the people being studied. Alice Goffman found herself facing just such a dilemma when conducting fieldwork on how young black men and their families negotiate the criminal justice system in one Philadelphia neighborhood she calls 6th Street. Most of these men were on parole or probation or had outstanding warrants. They spent much of their time trying to avoid the police and incarceration. Law enforcement does not make this easy for them. Goffman observed the police harassing these men in a variety of ways, from stopping and frisking them on the streets to searching their homes, often without probable cause. The courts offer little

recourse. Missed court dates and failure to pay court fees make it difficult for these men—and by extension their families and friends—to avoid the legal system.

During the six years that Goffman was in the field, she developed close relationships with two men in particular, Mike and Chuck. For a time, she even became their roommate. While establishing strong connections is important to build trust and gain access to research sites and subjects, Goffman found herself spending more time—and feeling more comfortable—with her friends on 6th Street than she did at the university at which she was studying. She also found herself engaging in legally questionable activities. One night she spent “on the run” with Chuck and his brother Reggie, hiding with them in a neighbor’s house from the police. After Chuck was shot and killed, Goffman drove Mike around to try to find Chuck’s killer. During one of these drives, Goffman waited in the car when Mike, who was carrying a loaded gun, got out and followed a man whom he thought shot Chuck. Luckily, Mike determined that this was the wrong man and returned to the car. If Mike had shot and killed this man, Goffman could have been an accomplice in a conspiracy to commit murder. *On the Run* reveals that the decision of when to observe and when to participate is complicated both ethically and legally when conducting ethnographic research. ●

Visit edge.sagepub.com/ritzeressentials4e, to

- Watch Goffman discuss her research findings from *On the Run* in her TED Talk, “How We’re Priming Some Kids for College—and Others for Prison.”
- Read a critical examination of the reliability of Goffman’s ethnographic methodology in Gideon Lewis-Kraus’s (2016) article, “The Trials of Alice Goffman.”

Courtesy of ONE Archives at the USC Libraries



For 40 years researchers studied the progression of syphilis in hundreds of poor black men in Tuskegee, Alabama. Unethically, they did not tell them they had the disease, nor did they treat them for it. Worse, they simply watched them suffer and eventually die painfully.

Objectivity, or “Value-Free” Sociology

Another issue relating to sociological research is whether researchers are, or can be, objective. That

is, do they allow personal preferences and judgments to bias their research? Many argue that value-laden research jeopardizes the entire field of sociology. The publication of such research—and public revelations about researcher biases—erodes and could destroy the credibility of the field as a whole. This discussion is traceable, once again, to the work of Max Weber (Black 2013). Taken to its extreme, *value-free sociology* means preventing all personal values from affecting any phase of the research process. However, this is not what Weber intended in his work on values.

In fact, Weber saw at least two roles for values in social research. The first is in the selection of a question to be researched. In that case, it is perfectly appropriate for researchers to be guided by their personal values, or the values that predominate in the society of the day. The second is in the analysis of the results of a research study. In that analysis, sociologists can, and should, use personal and social values to help them make sense of their findings. These values are an aid in interpretation and understanding. However, they are not to be used purposely to distort the findings or mislead the reader of a report on the study. ●

SUMMARY

Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim are the most important classical sociological theorists. Marx focused the majority of his attention on macro issues, particularly the structure of capitalist society. Unlike Marx, Weber did not focus exclusively on the economy but considered the importance of other social structures, particularly religion. Durkheim believed that social structures and cultural norms and values exert control over individuals that is not only necessary but also desirable.

Among other early sociological theorists, Georg Simmel focused on micro-level issues, specifically interactions among individuals. W. E. B. Du Bois was a pioneering researcher of race in America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thorstein Veblen studied consumption, particularly the ways in which the rich show off their wealth through conspicuous consumption.

Structural/functional, conflict/critical, and inter/actionist theories are the three main types of

contemporary sociological theory. Two influential structural/functional theories are structural-functionalism, which is concerned with both social structures and their functions and dysfunction, and structuralism, which uncovers the social impact of hidden or underlying structures.

Conflict/critical theories tend to emphasize societal struggles and inequality. Conflict theories stress the ways in which society is held together by power and coercion. Critical theory critically analyzes culture and how it is used to pacify opposition. Feminist theory critiques patriarchy, and queer theory suggests that there are no fixed and stable identities that determine who we are. Critical theories of race and racism argue that race continues to matter and that it intersects with other social statuses. Postmodern theory sees society coming to be dominated by simulations.

Inter/actionist theories deal mostly with micro-level interactions among people. Symbolic interactionism studies the effect of symbols on social interactions.

Ethnomethodology focuses on what people do rather than on what they think. Exchange theory considers how the rational evaluation of goals and the means to achieve them influence behavior.

Sociologists use different research methods, depending on the research questions they are studying. Quantitative research yields data in the form of numbers, usually derived from surveys and experiments. Qualitative research is conducted in natural settings and yields descriptive information. Researchers may choose to participate and play a role in what they are observing or engage in nonparticipant observation. Ethnographic research is more likely to be based on participant observation over an extended length of time. In interviews, respondents

are asked a series of questions, usually face-to-face. Survey research collects data through interviews and questionnaires. Experimentation manipulates one or more independent variables to examine their effect on one or more dependent variables. Sociologists also often engage in secondary data analysis, in which they reanalyze data collected by others. Secondary data may consist of statistical information, historical documents and analyses, or the content of cultural artifacts and messages.

Reliability is the degree to which a given measure produces the same results time after time. Validity is the degree to which a measure is accurate. Sociological researchers need to be mindful of a series of ethical issues.

KEY TERMS

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simulation, 43**social facts, 33****statistics, 48****stratified sample, 54****structural-functionalism, 37****structuralism, 38****survey research, 52****symbolic interactionism, 44****theories, 28****unanticipated consequences, 38****validity, 58****REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What are theories, and how do sociologists use theories to make sense of the social world? In what ways are theories developed by sociologists better than your own theorizing?
2. What are the major contributions of the classical theorists discussed in this chapter.
3. What are the functions and dysfunctions of using the internet to consume goods and services? On balance, do you think that consumption through the internet is positive or negative?
4. Why is feminist theory considered to be a critical theory?
5. What would proponents of the critical theories of race and racism outlined in this chapter think of the racial "dog whistles" used by Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential campaign and throughout his presidency? Would they see this as an advance over the more overt racism evident in the past?
6. What steps do researchers take when applying the scientific method? How would you apply the scientific method to get answers to a question you have about the social world?
7. What is the key value of conducting ethnographic research? How would a global ethnography help you make sense of your own place in the world?
8. Researchers use interviews to gather data by asking individuals a series of questions. How do researchers choose between prestructured and unstructured interviews? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each type of interview?
9. Some experiments allow researchers to take advantage of a naturally occurring event to study its effect on one or more dependent variables. Can you think of any recent events that might have been conducive to natural experiments? What would be the dependent variable or variables in your example?
10. What are some of the ethical concerns raised by sociological research? Use specific examples from research discussed in this chapter to describe these ethical concerns.



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