

scientific method (the)

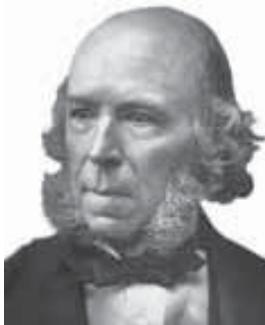
using objective, systematic observations to test theories

positivism the application of the scientific approach to the social world

sociology the scientific study of society and human behavior



Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who is credited as the founder of sociology, began to analyze the bases of the social order. Although he stressed that the scientific method should be applied to the study of society, he did not apply it himself.



Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), sometimes called the second founder of sociology, coined the term “survival of the fittest.” Spencer thought that helping the poor was wrong, that this merely helped the “less fit” survive.

Another impetus for the development of sociology was the success of the natural sciences. Just as tradition was breaking down and people were questioning fundamental aspects of life, **the scientific method**—using objective, systematic observations to test theories—was being tried out in chemistry and physics. Many secrets that had been concealed in nature were being uncovered. With tradition no longer providing the answers to questions about social life, the logical step was to apply the scientific method to these questions. The result was the birth of sociology.

Auguste Comte and Positivism

This idea of applying the scientific method to the social world, known as **positivism**, apparently was first proposed by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). With the philosophical upheaval of the French Revolution still fresh in his mind, Comte left the small town in which he had grown up and moved to Paris. The changes he experienced in this move, combined with those France underwent in the revolution, led Comte to become interested in what holds society together. What creates social order, he wondered, instead of anarchy or chaos? And then, once society does become set on a particular course, what causes it to change?

As Comte considered these questions, he concluded that the right way to answer them was to apply the scientific method to social life. Just as this method had revealed the law of gravity, so, too, it would uncover the laws that underlie society. Comte called this new science **sociology**—“the study of society” (from the Greek *logos*, “study of,” and the Latin *socius*, “companion,” or “being with others”). Comte stressed that this new science not only would discover social principles but also would apply them to social reform. Sociologists would reform the entire society, making it a better place to live.

To Comte, however, applying the scientific method to social life meant practicing what we might call “armchair philosophy”—drawing conclusions from informal observations of social life. He did not do what today’s sociologists would call research, and his conclusions have been abandoned. Nevertheless, Comte’s insistence that we must observe and classify human activities to uncover society’s fundamental laws is well taken. Because he developed this idea and coined the term *sociology*, Comte often is credited with being the founder of sociology.

Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who grew up in England, is sometimes called the second founder of sociology. Spencer disagreed profoundly with Comte that sociology should guide social reform. Spencer thought that societies evolve from lower (“barbarian”) to higher (“civilized”) forms. As generations pass, the most capable and intelligent (“the fittest”) members of a society survive, while the less capable die out. Thus, over time, societies improve. To help the lower classes is to interfere with this natural process. The fittest members will produce a more advanced society—unless misguided do-gooders get in the way and help the less fit survive.

Spencer called this principle “the survival of the fittest.” Although Spencer coined this phrase, it usually is attributed to his contemporary, Charles Darwin, who proposed that organisms evolve over time as they adapt to their environment. Because they are so similar to Darwin’s ideas about the evolution of organisms, Spencer’s views of the evolution of societies became known as *social Darwinism*.

Spencer’s ideas that charity and helping the poor were wrong offended many. The wealthy industrialists of the time, however, liked these ideas: They saw themselves as “the fittest”—and therefore superior. Spencer’s views also helped them avoid feelings of guilt for living like royalty while people around them went hungry.

Spencer did not conduct scientific studies. Like Comte, he simply developed ideas about society. Spencer gained a wide following in England and the United States, where he was sought after as a speaker, but eventually social Darwinism was discredited.

As divorce became more common, its meaning changed. Once a symbol of failure—and of immorality and irresponsibility—divorce came to indicate freedom and new beginnings. Removing the stigma from divorce shattered a barrier that had kept husbands and wives from breaking up, setting the stage for divorce on an even larger scale.

8. *Changes in the law.* As the law—itself a powerful symbol—began to reflect these changed ideas about divorce, it became an additional factor that encouraged divorce. Divorce previously had been granted only for severe reasons, such as adultery, but then legislators made “incompatibility” one of the grounds for divorce. After this came “no-fault” divorce, in which a couple could dissolve their marriage without accusing each other of wrongdoing. Most states even began to provide do-it-yourself divorce kits.

IN SUM

Symbolic interactionists explain an increasing divorce rate in terms of the changing symbols (or meanings) associated with both marriage and divorce. Changes in people’s ideas—about divorce, marital satisfaction, love, the nature of children and parenting, and the roles of husband and wife—have made marriage more fragile. No single change is *the* cause, but taken together, these changes provide a strong “push” toward divorce.

Are these changes good or bad? Central to symbolic interactionism is the position that to make a value judgment about change (or anything else) requires a value framework from which to view the change. Symbolic interactionism provides no such value framework. In short, symbolic interactionists, like other sociologists, can analyze social change, but they cannot pass judgment on that change.

Functional Analysis

The central idea of **functional analysis** is that society is a whole unit, made up of interrelated parts that work together. Functional analysis, also known as *functionalism* and *structural functionalism*, is rooted in the origins of sociology. Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer viewed society as a kind of living organism. Just as a person or animal has organs that function together, they wrote, so does society. Like an organism, if society is to function smoothly, its various parts must work together in harmony.

Emile Durkheim also viewed society as being composed of many parts, each with its own function. When all the parts of society fulfill their functions, society is in a “normal” state. If they do not fulfill their functions, society is in an “abnormal” or “pathological” state. To understand society, then, functionalists say that we need to look at both *structure* (how the parts of a society fit together to make the whole) and *function* (what each part does, how it contributes to society).

Robert Merton and Functionalism Robert Merton (1910–2003) dismissed the organic analogy, but he did maintain the essence of functionalism—the image of society as a whole composed of parts that work together. Merton used the term *functions* to refer to the beneficial consequences of people’s actions: Functions help keep a group (society, social system) in equilibrium. In contrast, *dysfunctions* are consequences that harm a society: They undermine a system’s equilibrium.

Functions can be either manifest or latent. If an action is *intended* to help some part of a system, it is a *manifest function*. For example, suppose that government officials become concerned about our low rate of childbirth. Congress offers a \$10,000 bonus for every child born to a married couple. The intention, or manifest function, of the bonus is to increase childbearing. Merton pointed out that people’s actions can also have *latent functions*; that is, they can have *unintended* consequences that help a system adjust. Let’s suppose that the bonus works and the birth rate jumps. As a result, the sale of diapers and baby furniture booms. Because the benefits to these businesses were not the intended consequences, they are latent functions of the bonus.

Of course, human actions can also hurt a system. Because such consequences usually are unintended, Merton called them *latent dysfunctions*. Let’s assume that the government has failed to specify a “stopping point” with regard to its bonus system. To collect

functional analysis a theoretical framework in which society is viewed as composed of various parts, each with a function that, when fulfilled, contributes to society’s equilibrium; also known as *functionalism* and *structural functionalism*

more bonuses, some people keep on having children. The more children they have, however, the more they need the next bonus to survive. Large families become common, and poverty increases. Welfare is reinstated, taxes jump, and the nation erupts in protest. Because these results were not intended and because they harmed the social system, they would represent latent dysfunctions of the bonus program.

IN SUM

From the perspective of functional analysis, society is a functioning unit, with each part related to the whole. Whenever we examine a smaller part, we need to look for its functions and dysfunctions to see how it is related to the larger unit. This basic approach can be applied to any social group, whether an entire society, a college, or even a group as small as a family.

Applying Functional Analysis Now let's apply functional analysis to the U.S. divorce rate. Functionalists stress that industrialization and urbanization undermined the traditional functions of the family. Let's see how each of the basic functions of the family has changed.

1. *Economic production.* Prior to industrialization, the family was an economic team. At that time, it was difficult to obtain the basic necessities of life, and to survive, family members had to work together to produce what they needed. When industrialization moved production from home to factory, it disrupted this family team. This weakened the bonds that tied family members to one another. Especially significant was the transfer of the husband-father to the factory, for this isolated him from the family's daily routine. Another result was that the wife-mother and children contributed less to the family's economic survival.
2. *Socialization of children.* While these sweeping changes were taking place, the government was growing larger and more powerful. As it expanded, it took over many family functions. To give just one example, schools took away from the family the education of children. In so doing, they assumed much of the responsibility for socializing children. To make certain that families went along with this change, states passed laws requiring school attendance and threatened parents with jail if they did not send their children to school.



Sociologists who use the *functionalist perspective* stress how industrialization and urbanization undermined the traditional *functions* of the family. Before industrialization, members of the family worked together as an economic unit, as in this painting by Leopoldo Romanach (1958–) of Havana, Cuba. As production moved away from the home, it took with it first the father and, more recently, the mother. One consequence is a major *dysfunction*, the weakening of family ties.

3. *Care of the sick and elderly.* As medical training and technology improved, care of the sick gradually shifted from the family to medical specialists. Government agencies multiplied, and care of the aged changed from being a family concern to a government obligation.
4. *Recreation.* As more disposable income became available to Americans, businesses sprang up to compete for that income. This cost the family a good part of its recreational function, for much entertainment and “fun” moved from home-based, family-centered activities to attendance at paid events.
5. *Sexual control.* The vast changes that swept the country also had an impact on the family’s influence on sexuality. Traditionally, only sexual relations within marriage were considered legitimate. Although this value was more ideal than real—even the Puritans had a lot of sex outside marriage (Smith and Hindus 1975)—the “sexual revolution” opened many alternatives to marital sex.
6. *Reproduction.* The only family function that might seem to be untouched is reproduction. Yet even this function has been moving gradually away from the family. A prime example is the number of single women who bear children. Over one third (36 percent) of all U.S. babies are born to unmarried mothers (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 84).

Even schools and doctors have taken over some of the family’s control over reproduction. A married woman, for example, can get an abortion without informing her husband, and some U.S. high schools distribute condoms.

A Glimpse of the Past To see how sharply family functions have changed, it may be useful to take a glimpse of family life in the 1800s.

When Phil became sick, he was nursed by Ann, his wife. She cooked for him, fed him, changed the bed linen, bathed him, read to him from the Bible, and gave him his medicine. (She did this in addition to doing the housework and taking care of their six children.) Phil was also surrounded by the children, who shouldered some of his chores while he was sick.

When Phil died, the male neighbors and relatives made the casket while Ann, her mother, and female friends washed and dressed the body. Phil was then “laid out” in the front parlor (the formal living room), where friends, neighbors, and relatives viewed him, paying their last respects. From there, friends moved his body to the church for the final message, and then to the grave they themselves had dug.

As you can see, the family used to have more functions than it does now. Families handled many aspects of life and death that we now assign to outside agencies. Not only did caring for the sick take place almost exclusively within the family but also death was a family affair—from preparing the body to burying it. Today we assume that such functions *properly* belong to specialized agencies, and few of us can imagine ourselves preparing the body of a close relative for burial. Such an act may even seem grotesque, almost barbarous, for our current customs also guide our feelings, another fascinating aspect of social life. (On pages 76–78, we return to the topic of emotions.)

IN SUM The family has lost many of its traditional functions, and others are presently under assault. Especially significant are changes in economic production. No longer is this a cooperative, home-based effort, with husbands and wives depending on one another for their interlocking contributions to a mutual endeavor. Husbands and wives today earn individual paychecks, and increasingly function as separate components in an impersonal, multinational, and even global system. When outside agencies take over family functions, the family becomes more fragile and an increase in divorce is inevitable. The fewer functions that family members have in common, the fewer are their “ties that bind”—and these ties are what help husbands and wives get through the problems they inevitably experience.