

theory a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work; an explanation of how two or more facts are related to one another

symbolic interactionism a theoretical perspective in which society is viewed as composed of symbols that people use to establish meaning, develop their views of the world, and communicate with one another

Applied sociology is not the same as social reform. It is an application of sociology in some specific setting, not an attempt to rebuild society, as early sociologists envisioned. Consequently, a new tension has emerged in sociology. Sociologists who want the emphasis to be on social reform say that applied sociology doesn't even come close to this. It is an application of sociology, but not an attempt to change society. Those who want the emphasis to remain on discovering knowledge say that when sociology is applied, it is no longer sociology. If sociologists use sociological principles to help teenagers escape from pimps, for example, is it still sociology?

At this point, let's consider how theory fits into sociology.

Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology

Facts never interpret themselves. To make sense out of life, we use our common sense. That is, to understand our experiences (our "facts"), we place them into a framework of more-or-less related ideas. Sociologists do this, too, but they place

Down-to-Earth Sociology

Careers in Sociology: What Applied Sociologists Do

MOST SOCIOLOGISTS TEACH IN colleges and universities, sharing sociological knowledge with college students, as your instructor is doing with you in this course. Applied sociologists, in contrast, work in a wide variety of areas—from counseling children to studying how diseases are transmitted. Some even make software more "user-friendly." (They study how people use software and give feedback to the programmers who design those products [Guice 1999].) To give you an idea of this variety, let's look over the shoulders of four applied sociologists.

Leslie Green, who does marketing research at Vanderveer Group in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, earned her bachelor's degree in sociology at Shippensburg University. She helps to develop strategies to get doctors to prescribe particular drugs. She sets up the meetings, locates moderators for the discussion groups, and arranges payments to the physicians who participate in the research. "My training in sociology," she says, "helps me in 'people skills.' It helps me to understand the needs of different groups, and to interact with them."

Stanley Capela, whose master's degree is from Fordham University, works as an applied sociologist at HeartShare Human Services in New York City. He evaluates how children's programs—such as ones that focus on housing, AIDS, group homes, and preschool education—actually work, compared with how they are supposed to work. He spots problems and suggests solutions. One of his assignments was to find out why it was taking so long to get children adopted, even though there was a long list of eager adoptive parents.

Capela pinpointed how the paperwork got bogged down as it was routed through the system and suggested ways to improve the flow of paperwork.

Laurie Banks, who received her master's degree in sociology from Fordham University, analyzes statistics for the New York City Health Department. As she examined death certificates, she noticed that a Polish neighborhood had a high rate of stomach cancer. She alerted the Centers for Disease Control, which conducted interviews in the neighborhood. They traced the cause to eating large amounts of sausage. In another case, Banks compared birth certificates with school records. She found that problems at birth—low birth weight, lack of prenatal care, and birth complications—were linked to low reading skills and behavior problems in school.

Daniel Knapp, who earned a doctorate from the University of Oregon, decided to apply sociology by going to the dumps. Moved by the idea that urban wastes should not simply be buried, that they could be recycled and reused, he tested this idea in a small way—by scavenging at the city dump at Berkeley, California. Starting a company called Urban Ore, Knapp did studies on how to recycle urban wastes. He also campaigned successfully for changes in waste disposal laws (Knapp 2005). Knapp became a major founder of the recycling movement in the United States, with a goal of changing human behavior, and his application of sociology continues to influence us all.

From just these few examples, you can catch a glimpse of the variety of work that applied sociologists do. Some work for corporations, some are employed by government and private agencies, and others run their own businesses. You can also see that you don't need a doctorate in order to work as an applied sociologist.

Down-to-Earth Sociology

Capturing Saddam Hussein: A Surprising Example of Applied Sociology

APPLIED SOCIOLOGY TAKES MANY twists and turns, but perhaps none as startling as capturing Saddam Hussein. After U.S.-led forces took over Baghdad, Hussein disappeared. His capture became a pressing goal with two purposes. The first was symbolic, a sign of the coalition's triumph. The second was practical: to prevent Hussein from directing resistance to the occupation of Iraq.

But Hussein was nowhere to be found. Rumors placed him all over the map, from neighboring countries to safe houses in Baghdad. To find him, U.S. intelligence officers began to apply sociology, specifically, a form known as *network analysis*. Analysts traced Hussein's tribal and family linkages (Hougham 2005). On a color-coded "people map," they placed Hussein's photo in a yellow circle, like a bull's-eye. They then drew links to people who were connected to Hussein, placing their photos closer to or farther from Hussein's photo on the basis of how close their relationship was with Hussein (Schmitt 2003).

The photos placed closest to Hussein represented an intimate and loyal group. These people were the most likely to



know where Hussein was, but because of their close ties to him, they also were the least likely to reveal this information. Those who were pictured slightly farther away knew people in this more intimate group, so it was likely that some of them had information about Hussein's whereabouts. Because these people's social ties to Hussein were not as strong, they provided the weaker links to try to break.

The approach worked. Using software programs to sift through

vast amounts of information gained from informants and electronic intercepts, the analysts drew the "people map" that pictured these social relationships. Identifying the weaker links led to the capture of Saddam Hussein.

for your Consideration

This unexpected application of sociology has made some sociologists uncomfortable (Hougham 2005). What they find especially bothersome is the specific result of this applied sociology, that Hussein was executed. What do you think?

their observations into a conceptual framework called a theory. A **theory** is a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work. It is an explanation of how two or more "facts" are related to one another.

Sociologists use three major theories: symbolic interactionism, functional analysis, and conflict theory. Let's first examine the main elements of these theories. Then let's apply each theory to the U.S. divorce rate, to see why it is so high. As we do this, you will see how each theory, or perspective, provides a distinct interpretation of social life.

Symbolic Interactionism

We can trace the origins of **symbolic interactionism** to the Scottish moral philosophers of the eighteenth century, who noted that individuals evaluate their own conduct by comparing themselves with others (Stryker 1990). In the United States, a long line of thinkers added to this analysis, including the pioneering psychologist William James (1842–1910) and the educator John Dewey (1859–1952), who analyzed how people use symbols to understand their experiences. This theoretical perspective was brought to sociology by Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929), William I. Thomas (1863–1947), and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Cooley's and Mead's analyses of how symbols lie at the basis of the self-concept are discussed on pages 70–72.

Symbols in Everyday Life Symbolic interactionists study how people use *symbols*—the things to which we attach meaning—to develop their views of the world and to



George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is one of the founders of symbolic interactionism, a major theoretical perspective in sociology. He taught at the University of Chicago, where his lectures were popular. Although he wrote little, after his death students compiled his lectures into an influential book, *Mind, Self, and Society*.

communicate with one another. Without symbols, our social life would be no more sophisticated than that of animals. For example, without symbols we would have no aunts or uncles, employers or teachers—or even brothers and sisters. I know that this sounds strange, but it is symbols that define what our relationships are. There would still be reproduction, of course, but no symbols to tell us how we are related to whom. We would not know to whom we owe respect and obligations, or from whom we can expect privileges—the stuff that human relationships are made of.

Look at it like this: If you think of someone as your aunt or uncle, you behave in certain ways, but if you think of that person as a boyfriend or girlfriend, you behave quite differently. It is the symbol that tells you how you are related to others—and how you should act toward them.

To make this clearer

Suppose that you have fallen head-over-heels in love and are going to marry. The night before your wedding, your mother confides that she had a child before she married your father, a child that she gave up for adoption. She then adds that she has just discovered that the person you are going to marry is this child. You can see how the symbol will change overnight!—and your behavior, too!

Symbols allow not only relationships to exist, but also society. Without symbols, we could not coordinate our actions with those of other people. We could not make plans for a future date, time, and place. Unable to specify times, materials, sizes, or goals, we could not build bridges and highways. Without symbols, there would be no movies or musical instruments. We would have no hospitals, no government, no religion. The class you are taking could not exist—nor could this book. On the positive side, there would be no war.

In short, symbolic interactionists analyze how our behaviors depend on the ways we define ourselves and others. They study face-to-face interaction, examining how people work out their relationships and how they make sense out of life and their place in it. Symbolic interactionists point out that even the *self* is a symbol, for it consists of the ideas we have about who we are. And the self is a changing symbol: As we interact with others, we adjust our views of who we are based on how we interpret the reactions of others to us. We'll get more into this later.

Applying Symbolic Interactionism To better understand symbolic interactionism, let's see how changes in symbols (meanings) help to explain the high U.S. divorce rate. For background, you should understand that marriage used to be a lifelong commitment. Divorce was viewed as an immoral act, a flagrant disregard for public opinion, and the abandonment of adult responsibilities.

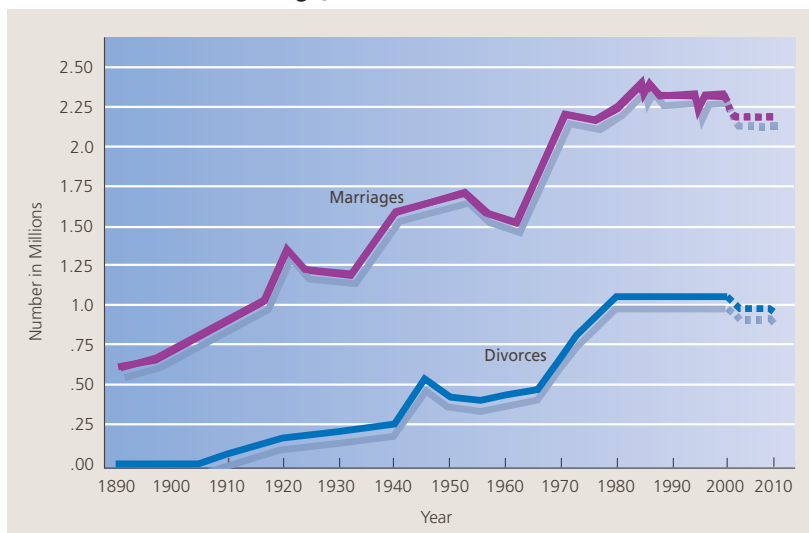
1. *Emotional satisfaction.* Slowly, the meaning of marriage began to change. In 1933, sociologist William Ogburn observed that personality was becoming more important in mate selection. In 1945, sociologists Ernest Burgess and Harvey Locke noted the growing importance of mutual affection, understanding, and compatibility in marriage. These sociologists had observed a fundamental shift in U.S. marriage: Husbands and wives were coming to expect—and demand—greater emotional satisfaction from one another.

As this trend intensified, intimacy became the core of marriage, and Americans placed greater importance on a potential spouse's physical attractiveness (Bus et al. 2001). At the same time, as society grew more complex and impersonal, Americans came to view marriage as a solution to the tensions that society produced (Lasch 1977). This new form, "companionate marriage," contributed to divorce, for it encouraged people to expect that their spouse would satisfy "each and every need." As sociologists say, this helped to make marriage an "overloaded institution."

2. *The love symbol.* Our symbol of love also helps to "overload" marriage. Expecting "true love" to be a constant source of emotional satisfaction sets people up for crushed hopes, for when dissatisfactions enter marriage, as they inevitably do, spouses tend to blame one another for what they see as the other's failure. Being engulfed in the symbol of love at the time of marriage blinds them to the basic unreality of their expectations.

3. *The meaning of children.* Ideas about childhood have undergone a deep historical shift, with far-reaching consequences for the U.S. family. In medieval Europe, children were viewed as miniature adults, and there was no sharp separation between the worlds of adults and children (Ariés 1965). Boys were apprenticed at about age 7, while girls of the same age learned the homemaking duties associated with being a wife. In the United States, just three generations ago, children “became adults” when they graduated from eighth grade and went to work. Today’s contrast is amazing: From miniature adults, children have been culturally fashioned into impressionable, vulnerable, and innocent beings who are not expected to assume adult responsibilities until their mid-twenties.
4. *The meaning of parenthood.* These changed ideas of childhood have had a deep impact on our ideas of good parenting. Today’s parents are expected not only to provide unending amounts of love and tender care but also to help their children “reach their potential.” Today’s child rearing lasts longer and is more demanding. These greater responsibilities place heavier burdens on today’s couples, and along with them, more strain on marriage.
5. *Marital roles.* In earlier generations, the responsibilities and privileges of husbands and wives were defined clearly. Newlyweds knew what they had a right to expect from each other. In contrast, today’s more vague guidelines force couples to work out more aspects of their roles on their own. Many struggle to figure out how to divide up responsibilities for work, home, and children.
6. *Perception of alternatives.* As these changes were taking place, more and more women were taking jobs outside the home. As more wives earned paychecks of their own, many began to see alternatives to remaining in unhappy marriages. Symbolic interactionists consider the perception of an alternative to an unhappy marriage to be an essential first step to making divorce possible.
7. *The meaning of divorce.* Divorce increased as these changes came together—expecting more emotional satisfaction in marriage, new marital and parental roles, and a growing perception of alternatives to an unhappy marriage. As Figure 1.4 below shows, divorce went from practically zero in 1890 to our current 1.1 million divorces a year. (The plateau for both marriage and divorce since 1980 is probably due to increased cohabitation.)

Figure 1.4 U.S. Marriage, U.S. Divorce



Source: By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 1998:Table 92 and 2007:Table 119; earlier editions for earlier years. the broken lines indicate the author's estimates.

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.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory provides a third perspective on social life. Unlike the functionalists, who view society as a harmonious whole, with its parts working together, conflict theorists stress that society is composed of groups that are competing with one another for scarce resources. Although alliances or cooperation may prevail on the surface, beneath that surface lies a struggle for power.

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory Karl Marx, the founder of conflict theory, witnessed the Industrial Revolution that transformed Europe. He saw that peasants who had left the land to seek work in cities had to work for wages that provided barely enough to eat. Things were so bad that the average worker died at age 30, the average wealthy person at age 50 (Edgerton 1992:87). Shocked by this suffering and exploitation, Marx began to analyze society and history. As he did so, he developed **conflict theory**. He concluded that the key to human history is *class conflict*. In each society, some small group controls the means of production and exploits those who are not in control. In industrialized societies, the struggle is between the *bourgeoisie*, the small group of capitalists who own the means to produce wealth, and the *proletariat*, the mass of workers who are exploited by the bourgeoisie. The capitalists also control politics: If the workers rebel, the capitalists are able to call on the power of the state to subdue them.

When Marx made his observations, capitalism was in its infancy and workers were at the mercy of their employers. Workers had none of what we take for granted today—minimum wages, eight-hour days, coffee breaks, five-day work weeks, paid vacations and holidays, medical benefits, sick leave, unemployment compensation, Social Security, and, for union workers, the right to strike. Marx's analysis reminds us that these benefits came not from generous hearts, but from workers forcing concessions from their employers.

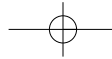
Conflict Theory Today Some conflict sociologists use conflict theory in a much broader sense than Marx did. They examine how conflict permeates every layer of society—whether that be a small group, an organization, a community, or the entire society. When people in a position of authority try to enforce conformity, which they must do, this creates resentment and resistance. The result is a constant struggle throughout society to determine who has authority and how far that authority goes (Turner 1978; Bartos and Wehr 2002).

Sociologist Lewis Coser (1913–2003) pointed out that conflict is most likely to develop among people who are in close relationships. These people have worked out ways to distribute responsibilities and privileges, power and rewards. Any change in this arrangement can lead to hurt feelings, bitterness, and conflict. Even in intimate relationships, then, people are in a constant balancing act, with conflict lying uneasily just beneath the surface.

Feminists and Conflict Theory Just as Marx stressed conflict between capitalists and workers, many feminists stress a similar conflict between men and women. A primary focus is the historical, contemporary, and global inequalities of men and women—and how the traditional dominance by men can be overcome to bring about equality of the sexes. Feminists are not united by the conflict perspective, however. They tackle a variety of topics and use whatever theory applies. (Feminism is discussed in Chapter 11.)

Applying Conflict Theory To explain why the U.S. divorce rate is high, conflict theorists focus on how men's and women's relationships have changed. For millennia, men dominated women. Women had few alternatives other than accepting their exploitation. Today, in contrast, with industrialization, women can meet their basic survival needs outside of marriage. Industrialization has also fostered a culture in which females participate in social worlds beyond the home. Consequently, with the ability to refuse to bear burdens that earlier generations accepted as inevitable, today's women are much more likely to dissolve a marriage that becomes intolerable—or even unsatisfactory.

conflict theory a theoretical framework in which society is viewed as composed of groups that are competing for scarce resources



macro-level analysis an examination of large-scale patterns of society

micro-level analysis an examination of small-scale patterns of society

social interaction what people do when they are in one another's presence

nonverbal interaction communication without words through gestures, use of space, silence, and so on

IN SUM

The dominance of men over women was once considered natural and right. As women gained education and earnings, however, their willingness to accept men's domination diminished, and they strived for more power. One consequence has been a higher divorce rate as wives grew less inclined to put up with relationships that they defined as unfair. From the conflict perspective, then, our increase in divorce is not a sign that marriage has weakened, but, rather, a sign that women are making headway in their historical struggle with men.

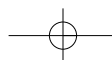
Levels of Analysis: Macro and Micro

A major difference between these three theoretical perspectives is their level of analysis. Functionalists and conflict theorists focus on the **macro level**; that is, they examine large-scale patterns of society. In contrast, symbolic interactionists usually focus on the **micro level**, on **social interaction**—what people do when they are in one another's presence. These levels are summarized in Table 1.1 below.

To make this distinction between micro and macro levels clearer, let's return to the example of the homeless, with which we opened this chapter. To study homeless people, symbolic interactionists would focus on the micro level. They would analyze what homeless people do when they are in shelters and on the streets. They would also analyze their communications, both their talk and their **nonverbal interaction** (gestures, silence, use of space, and so on). The observations I made at the beginning of this chapter about the silence in the homeless shelter, for example, would be of interest to symbolic interactionists.

Table 1.1 Major Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology

Perspective	Usual Level of Analysis	Focus of Analysis	Key Terms	Applying the Perspective to the U.S. Divorce Rate
Symbolic Interactionism	Microsociological: examines small-scale patterns of social interaction	Face-to-face interaction, how people use symbols to create social life	Symbols Interaction Meanings Definitions	Industrialization and urbanization changed marital roles and led to a redefinition of love, marriage, children, and divorce.
Functional Analysis (also called functionalism and structural functionalism)	Macrosociological: examines large-scale patterns of society	Relationships among the parts of society; how these parts are functional (have beneficial consequences) or dysfunctional (have negative consequences)	Structure Functions (manifest and latent) Dysfunctions Equilibrium	As social change erodes the traditional functions of the family, family ties weaken, and the divorce rate increases.
Conflict Theory	Macrosociological: examines large-scale patterns of society	The struggle for scarce resources by groups in a society; how the elites use their power to control the weaker groups	Inequality Power Conflict Competition Exploitation	When men control economic life, the divorce rate is low because women find few alternatives to a bad marriage. The high divorce rate reflects a shift in the balance of power between men and women.



This micro level, however, would not interest functionalists and conflict theorists. They would focus instead on the macro level. Functionalists would examine how changes in the parts of society have increased homelessness. They might look at how changes in the family (fewer children, more divorce) and economic conditions (inflation, fewer unskilled jobs, loss of jobs to workers overseas) cause homelessness among people who are unable to find jobs and who have no family to fall back on. For their part, conflict theorists would stress the struggle between social classes. They would be especially interested in how decisions by international elites on global production and trade affect the local job market, and along with it unemployment and homelessness.

Putting the Theoretical Perspectives Together

Which theoretical perspective should we use to study human behavior? Which level of analysis is the correct one? As you have seen, these theoretical perspectives produce contrasting pictures of human life. In the case of divorce, these interpretations are quite different from the commonsense understanding that two people are simply “incompatible.” *Because each theory focuses on different features of social life, each provides a distinct interpretation. Consequently, it is necessary to use all three theoretical lenses to analyze human behavior. By combining the contributions of each, we gain a more comprehensive picture of social life.*

Trends Shaping the Future of Sociology



Two major trends indicate changing directions in sociology. Let's look again at the relationship of sociology to the reforming of society, and then at globalization.

Sociology Full Circle: Reform Versus Research

Three Stages in the Development of Sociology A tension between social reform and social analysis has always run through sociology. To better understand this tension, some sociologists find it useful to divide sociology into three major time periods (Lazarsfeld and Reitz 1989). During the *first* phase, sociologists stressed the need to do research in order to improve society. One of the first presidents of the American Sociological Society, Albion Small, made this goal explicit. In 1912, Small said that the primary reason for sociology was its “practical application to the improvement of social life.” He said that sociologists should use science to gain knowledge, and then use that knowledge to “realize visions” (Fritz 1989). This first phase of sociology lasted until the 1920s.

During the *second* phase, from the 1920s until World War II, the emphasis switched from making the world a better place to making sociology a respected field of knowledge. Sociologists emphasized *basic* or *pure sociology*, that is, research and theory aimed at making discoveries about life in human groups, but not directing that knowledge toward making changes in those groups. They achieved this goal within a generation, and almost every college and university in the United States added sociology to its course offerings. It is because of these efforts that you are able to take this introductory course in sociology.

We are now in a *third* phase, which began around the end of World War II. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court made a major ruling partially based on sociological research. The Court was deciding whether racially segregated public schools were constitutional. Up to this time, states followed a so-called “separate but equal” doctrine and had separate public schools for whites and blacks. (The schools, as many observers noted, were separate, but certainly not equal.) In this landmark ruling (*Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*), which banned segregated public schools, sociologists testified about the harmful effects of segregation.

This fundamental change in law had a direct impact on education across the country. It also made sociologists more aware of their potential to bring about social change. Just as sociologists switched from their initial concern with improving society to developing abstract knowledge, today they are seeking ways to apply their research findings. With