

Introduction

Table 1.1 Theory in Everyday Life		
Perspective	Approach to Society	Case Study: College Administrations in the United States
Structural Functionalism	Assumes that society is a unified whole that functions because of the contributions of its separate structures.	Those who are admitted are worthy and well qualified, while those who are not admitted do not deserve to be. There are other places in society for them besides the university.
Conflict Theory	Sees social conflict as the basis of society and social change and emphasizes a materialist view of society, a critical view of the status quo, and a dynamic model of historical change.	Admissions decisions may be made on the basis of criteria other than grades and scores. For example, some applicants may get in because their fathers are major university donors, while others may get in because of their talents in sports or music. Some may be denied admission based on criteria like race, gender, or sexuality.
Symbolic Interactionism	Asserts that interaction and meaning are central to society and assumes that meanings are not inherent but are created through interaction.	University admissions processes are all about self-presentation and meaning-making in interaction. How does an applicant present himself or herself to impress the admissions committee? How does the admissions committee develop an understanding of the kind of applicant it's looking for? How do applicants interpret their acceptances and rejections?
Postmodernism	Suggests that social reality is diverse, pluralistic, and constantly in flux.	An acceptance doesn't mean you're smart, and a rejection doesn't mean you're stupid; be careful of any "facts" you may be presented with, as they are illusory and contingent.

Theory in Everyday Life¹

Sociologists are interested in every aspect of social life. Sociologists study how and why people act the way that they do. More often than not, sociologists study the domestic society, but they also study other cultures and societies. This module will introduce you to the practice of sociology. You will learn about the discipline's history, key theories and theorists, and the basic ways that sociologists conduct research. You will participate in two discussion activities and submit Project 1, whose subject matter you will revisit later in the course.

Why Sociology?

Sociology is the systematic scientific study of human society and social behavior. Sociologists, people that study sociology, are interested in social institutions, such as the economy or education, groups of people and individuals. Sociologists study how people come together to create a social system that works, for better or worse. In reality, you don't have to be a sociologist to study society. Every individual collects data every day as they go about living their lives. Sociologists pay attention to the things that happen around individuals and they store those things away as data to help understand the world. This practice is described in the textbook as "everyday" sociology because everyone collects a great deal of data that tells them how society works. For example, you may have heard the term "street smart." This refers to the practice of everyday sociology. It means that you have experiences of life on the streets and know how to avoid the risks and dangers that

someone with less experience may be unaware of. If you want to verify what the everyday person deems fact, you must take the role of the stranger and study society as if you are seeing it for the first time.

Sociologists differ in their study of sociology because they employ the **Sociological Perspective**, or **The Beginner's Mind** and they understand the effect of **culture shock**. The Sociological Perspective means thinking sociologically about the data collected. The Beginner's Mind means approaching sociology from the perspective of a beginner, someone that has no knowledge or bias about the way society works. Culture shock refers to the disorientation or anxiety that you feel when you are faced with a new cultural definition for life. For example, most students that attend Ivy League universities come from families with wealth and higher incomes. As this [Boston Globe](#) article attests, students from families with fewer resources that go to an Ivy League school may feel uncomfortable and unsure of how to behave in the new culture of university life.

The Sociological Imagination

Sociologists also use the [sociological imagination](#) [Video, 4:24 mins]. This means understanding how personal biographies and history intersect to determine your social outcomes and understanding. Each individual has a unique biography but they share their history with many. The way that you interact influences your biography. But your interactions are also shaped by your social history. For example, if you talk to a 90 year old female relative, her biography will likely have been influenced by the opportunities that were available to women in the 1950s. She may have married young and never worked outside the home, not due to personal interests, but due to limited opportunities for women to work. Or perhaps she was very involved in the social movement to improve opportunities for women. She may have rejected the cultural expectations of the 1950s and made her own way. Either way, the history of gender dynamics in the culture would influence her personal biography just as her actions influenced the gender dynamics.



C. Wright Mills²

Sociology is studied at both the **macro** and the **micro** levels. Sociologists that focus on the macro level look at the “big picture.” They might examine how social institutions influence individuals and other institutions. For example, they might look at the relationship between higher education and income. Or they might look at who has access to higher education. A micro level researcher would focus on the individual or the “little picture.” They might, for example, study the difficulties that poor students have while trying to get a higher education.

Sociologists also apply a theoretical understanding to the social world. There are three major theoretical paradigms in sociology. They are structural functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism.

The Role of Institutions in Social Order

Structural Functionalism [Video, 2:14 mins] builds on the works of Comte and Durkheim. This theory views society as a system of structures or institutions, each with a unique function, that work together to promote solidarity. They argue that every culture has the same structures, though they may not look the same. For example, if you live in the West, you can access the media 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you live in a small village in a less developed nation, your primary source of news may be through personal contacts with others or word of mouth. Both serve the role of media even though they look different. In the United States, you could look at gender roles from this perspective. The family begins to teach gender the moment a baby is born. Parents bring babies home in pink (for a girl) or blue (for a boy). They give little girls baby dolls to play with and little boys get active toys like sports equipment or toy trucks. Most religions (not all) are Patriarchal. Men lead the congregations and women serve in less powerful positions. God, at least in the Judeo-Christian beliefs, is portrayed as masculine. Studies of elementary education have found that boys get called on more and girls are rewarded for being quiet or passive. Studies of middle school students have found that girls “dumb down” so that they won’t be seen as “too smart.” Most elected officials are male. This is an example of how family, religion, education and politics work together to enforce gender roles. (You can also look at how they are working together now to change these gender roles.)



Social Institutions³

Understanding Inequality as a Social Force

Conflict Theory [Video, 1:58 mins] builds on the work of Karl Marx. Marx was interested in understanding how capitalism, an economic system that developed in the Industrial Revolution, created competition for resources. He argued that your place in society was directly related to your relationship to production. He argued that competition for resources drove social conflict and that this could motivate social change.

Conflict theorists see society as an arena of inequality whose resulting conflicts may bring about social change. For example, a conflict theorist would argue that inequality exists because the wealthy need the poor. The poor are a source of cheap labor. The wealthy want to protect their profits, and to do this, they



The Economy and Social Change⁴

need to keep wages low. This is only possible when there is intense competition for jobs that pay only a living, or subsistence wage.

The Self as a Social Construction

[Symbolic Interactionism](#) [Video, 1:54 mins] argues that society is created through interactions by the use of symbols to which society attaches shared meaning. This theory is primarily used by social psychologists that want to examine how and why people behave the way that they do. For example, a single person that meets someone to whom they are attracted may try to scan the left hand of that individual. This is because society has the symbol of the wedding ring. There is the social expectation that if you are married, and therefore out of the dating pool, you will wear a ring on your left hand. That ring is a symbol to which society has attached shared meaning. If you are not married and wear a band on the left hand, people will assume that you are not single. If you do not wear a ring, people will assume that you are available. Language is another example of a symbol to which societies attach shared meaning. If you ask an English speaker for a banana, he or she will not hand you an apple. People construct their understanding of society from the symbols that they share.



The Self in Society⁵

The World as our Laboratory

Sociologists view the world as a [research laboratory](#) [Video, 3:14 mins]. If you are to understand society, you need to get out in society and collect data. The only way to understand how a system works is to examine the way that individuals within that system view the world. Sociologists use a variety of methods. **Quantitative methods** typically use large samples and utilize mathematical or statistical equations in their analysis. Sociologists would use a survey or a secondary source of data for this type of study. **Qualitative methods** typically use smaller samples and do not utilize statistics. Sociologists would use an ethnography, observation or interview for this type of study. The question always arises as to which method is the best method. And the answer to that is...it depends.



Understanding Research⁶

Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Surveys are fast, but expensive. Interviews and other qualitative methods are inexpensive but very time consuming. As much as sociologists hate to admit it, time and money do factor in to the method chosen. When sociologists have unlimited time

and unlimited money, they choose a method based on what they want to know.

If one has a hypothesis then one needs a quantitative methodology. A survey will likely be used, the most common type of instrument used for quantitative data. The risk of this type of research is that writing questions to produce valid data must be done carefully. One needs to be sure not to ask double-barreled questions. For example, “Did you vote in the last election and did you vote Republican” is a double barreled question. It is impossible for anyone that voted for a non-Republican to answer this question correctly. We also need to be careful not to ask questions in a way that leads the person to give a certain response such as “Do you agree that the use of marijuana should be illegal because it leads to adolescent drug addiction?” Also, surveys are best limited to close ended questions. These are questions where we ask a person to choose from a list of responses. “How did you vote in the last election? Republican, Democratic or third party?” The weakness of this type of question is that one may not have a complete list of what the subjects find important. The strength of this type of research is that it is representative. It allows sociologists to use a sample to determine what the larger society is experiencing. It provides a snapshot of social life.

If one has a research question, one will likely use qualitative methods. This approach allows sociologists to talk to individuals in depth. Rather than having them choose from a list of responses that may not be complete, one can use open ended questions. They are able to tell sociologists what they think is important about a subject. This gives a better understanding of the small group experience. In this example, a sociologist would use interviews, ethnography or observation to collect data. The problem with this type of data is that it is not representative. It will reflect the sample, but one cannot say that it reflects the group at large. Also, while it is cheap, it can take a very long time. Ethnographic research, done correctly, can take years to complete.

Now that you have read and reflected on the importance of sociology as a discipline and approach to studying individuals and society, you will have an opportunity to explore these subjects in the activities that follow.

Image Citation:

¹ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

² Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

³ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

⁴ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

⁵ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

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