

# The Sociological View

## OUTLINE

- What Is Sociology?
- What Is Sociological Theory?
- How Did Sociology Develop?
- What Are the Major Theoretical Perspectives?
- What Is the Scientific Method?
- How Do Sociologists Conduct Research?
- What Are the Ethics of Sociological Research?
- How Do Sociologists “Do” Sociology?



At one o'clock on a mid-December morning in 2001, Ralph Klein, premier of Alberta, on his way home from a social gathering, had his limousine driver stop at a downtown homeless shelter for men. The intoxicated leader of the province barged into the Herb Jamieson Centre, a 249-bed facility, and proceeded to interrogate the homeless men. Witnesses claim he berated the residents, angrily shouting at them, demanding to know why

they didn't just get a job. After causing the commotion, the premier left the building, but only after he patronizingly threw a wad of money at a group of men, the finale of the scene.

Following publicity surrounding the incident, the premier publicly apologized for his behaviour and admitted to having a drinking problem. Many Albertans and Canadian citizens outside of the province were outraged at his behaviour. Many were not. An article appearing in the *Globe and Mail* shortly after the incident stated that the premier should be praised for his words, which represented the thoughts of many. In fact, reports indicated that the premier's popularity increased following the incident.

Was Premier Klein's reaction to homelessness a response shared by a majority of Albertans? What would Canadians from other provinces think of his behaviour? Is his behaviour

justifiable? Homelessness is a social problem that evokes strong reactions from some, a neutral response from others, an annoyed and angry response from still others. How do you respond when you are approached by a homeless person asking for spare change? What thoughts run through your mind?

Sociologists study social patterns that many people share. As the sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote over 40 years ago, if one person is unemployed, it is a personal problem, but if thousands of people are unemployed, their difficulty is a social problem. Sociologists look for root causes of such social patterns in the way society is organized and governed (Mills [1959] 2000a).

As a field of study, sociology is extremely broad in scope. You'll see throughout this book the tremendous range of topics sociologists investigate—from tattooing to TV viewing, from neighbourhood groups to global economic patterns, from peer pressure to class consciousness. Sociologists look at how other people influence your behaviour; how the government, religion, and the economy affect you; and how you yourself affect others. These aren't just academic questions. Sociology matters because it illuminates your life and your world, whether you are going to school, working for pay, or raising a family.

This first chapter introduces sociology as a social science, one that is characterized by a special skill called the *sociological imagination*. We'll meet three pioneering thinkers—Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx—and discuss the theoretical perspectives that grew out of their work. We'll see how sociologists use the scientific method to investigate the many questions they pose. Sociologists use surveys, observation, experiments, and existing sources in their research; they often wrestle with ethical issues that arise during their studies. We'll examine some practical uses for their research at the end of the chapter.

## WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

**Sociology** is the systematic study of social behaviour and human groups. It focuses primarily on the influence of social relationships on people's attitudes and behaviour and on how societies are established and change. There are two levels of analysis in sociology. **Macrosociology** focuses on broad features of social structures in society, such as social classes and the relations of groups to one other. **Microsociology** focuses on processes and patterns of social interaction on a smaller scale. This textbook deals with such varied topics as families, the workplace, street gangs, business firms, political parties, genetic engineering, schools, religions, and labour unions. It is concerned with love, poverty, conformity, discrimination, illness, technology, and community.

## The Sociological Imagination

In attempting to understand social behaviour, sociologists rely on an unusual type of creative thinking. C. Wright Mills described such thinking as the *sociological imagination*—an awareness of the relationship between an individual and the wider society. This awareness allows all of us (not just sociologists) to comprehend the links between our immediate, personal social settings and the remote, impersonal social world that surrounds us and helps to shape us (Mills [1959] 2000a).

A key element in the sociological imagination is the ability to view one's own society as an outsider would, rather than only from the perspective of personal experiences and cultural biases. Consider something as simple as the practice of eating while walking. In Canada people think nothing of consuming coffee or chocolate as they walk along the street. Sociologists would see this as a pattern of acceptable behaviour because others regard it as acceptable. Yet sociologists need to go beyond one culture to place the practice in perspective. This “normal” behaviour is quite unacceptable in some other parts of the world. For example, in Japan people do not eat while walking. Streetside sellers and vending machines dispense food everywhere, but the Japanese will stop to eat or drink whatever they buy before they continue on their way. In their eyes, to engage in another activity while eating shows disrespect for the food preparers, even if the food comes out of a vending machine.

The sociological imagination allows us to go beyond personal experiences and observations to understand broader public issues. Divorce, for example, is unquestionably a personal hardship for a husband and wife. However, C. Wright Mills advocated using the sociological imagination to view divorce not simply as the personal problem of a particular man or woman, but rather as a societal concern. From this perspective, an increase in the divorce rate serves to redefine a major social institution, the family. Today, households frequently include stepparents and half-sisters or -brothers whose parents have divorced and remarried.

Sociological imagination can bring new understanding to daily life around us. Since 1992, sociologists David Miller and Richard Schaefer (one of this text's authors) have studied the food bank system of the United States, which distributes food to hungry individuals and families. On the face of it, food banks seem above reproach. After all, as Miller and Schaefer learned in their research, more than one out of four children in the United States is hungry. One-third of the nation's homeless people report eating one meal per day or less. What could be wrong with charities redistributing to pantries and shelters food that used to be destined for landfills? In Canada in 2004, 550 food banks and more than 2,653 affiliated agencies were in operation (Canadian Association of Food Banks 2004). In March of 2004 alone, 841,640 Canadians received groceries from a food bank, an 8.5 percent increase since 2003 and a 123 percent increase since 1989 (Canadian Association of Food Banks 2004).

Many observers would uncritically applaud the distribution of food to needy citizens. But let's look deeper. While supportive of and personally involved in such efforts, Miller and Schaefer (1993) have drawn on the sociological imagination to offer a more probing view of these activities. They note that powerful forces in our society—such as the federal government, major food retailers, and other large corporations—have joined in charitable food distribution arrangements. Perhaps as a result, the focus of such relief programs is too restricted. The homeless are to be fed, not housed; the unemployed are to be given meals, not jobs. Relief efforts assist hungry individuals and families without challenging the existing social order (for example, by demanding a redistribution of wealth). Of course, without these limited successes in distributing food, starving people might assault patrons of restaurants, loot grocery stores, or literally die of starvation on the steps of city halls and across from Parliament. Such critical thinking is typical of sociologists, as they draw on the sociological imagination to study a social issue—in this case, hunger (Second Harvest 2003).



**You attend a rock concert one night and a religious service the next morning. What differences do you see in how the two audiences behave and in how they respond to the leader? What might account for these differences?**

The sociological imagination is an empowering tool. It allows us to look beyond a limited understanding of things to see the world and its people in a new way and through a broader lens than we might otherwise use. It may be as simple as understanding why a roommate prefers country music to hip hop, or it may open up a whole different way of understanding whole populations in the world. For example, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, many citizens wanted to understand how Muslims throughout the world perceived their country, and why. From time to time this textbook will offer you the chance to exercise your own sociological imagination in a variety of situations which will show you how “sociology matters.” These exercises, like the one on the left, will show you how sociology offers new insights into what is going on around you, in your own life as well as in the larger society.

## Sociology and the Social Sciences

Is sociology a science? The term *science* refers to the body of knowledge obtained by methods based on systematic observation. Like researchers in other scientific disciplines, sociologists engage in organized, systematic study of social phenomena to enhance understanding. All scientists, whether studying mushrooms or murderers, attempt to collect precise information through methods of study that are as objective as possible. They rely on careful recording of observations and accumulation of data.

Of course, there is a great difference between sociology and physics, between psychology and astronomy. For this reason, the sciences are commonly divided into natural and social sciences. *Natural science* is the study of the physical features of nature and the ways in which

they interact and change. Astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, and physics are all natural sciences. **Social science** is the study of various aspects of human society. The social sciences include sociology, anthropology, economics, history, psychology, and political science.

These social science disciplines have a common focus on the social behaviour of people, yet each has a particular orientation. Anthropologists study human beings in their totality, ranging from human biological and social origins to present-day societies, including the origin of languages and their use today. Economists explore the ways in which people produce and exchange goods and services, along with money and other resources. Historians are concerned with the peoples and events of the past and their significance for us today. Political scientists study international relations, the workings of government, and the exercise of power and authority. Psychologists investigate personality and individual behaviour. So what does *sociology* focus on? It emphasizes the influence that society has on people's attitudes and behaviours and the ways in which people shape society. Humans are social animals; therefore, sociologists scientifically examine our social relationships with others.

Let's consider how the different social sciences might approach the hotly debated issue of gun control. In Canada the registration of all handguns has been required by federal law since 1934, and since 1968 permits to carry them have been restricted to a few specific situations (i.e. police, members of gun clubs, in certain jobs such as transporting large amounts of cash or valuables, and in extreme cases—about 50—where police protection isn't adequate). Canada has always had stricter firearm regulations than the United States, particularly regarding handguns. In 1995, with the passage of the *Firearms Act* it became law for individuals with any kind of firearm to apply for a license from the Canadian Firearms Centre by January, 2001. The *Firearms Act* aims to deter the misuse of firearms, to control access to them, and to control specific weapons. In the years leading up to the passage of the Act, Canadians witnessed and participated in a hot debate that centred on issues of privacy, freedom, and increasing government intervention and control. Political scientists studying the debate and process leading up to the passage of the Act would look at the impact of interest groups, such as the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, who supported the Act, versus the Coalition of Responsible Firearms Owners and Sportsmen, who opposed it, on lawmakers. Historians would examine how guns were used over time in our country and elsewhere. Anthropologists would focus on the use of weapons in a variety of cultures as means of protection as well as symbols of power. Psychologists would look at individual cases and assess the impact firearms have on their owners as well as on individual victims of gunfire. Economists would be interested in how the manufacture and sale of firearms affect communities.

And what approach would sociologists take? They might look at who owns firearms in Canada. They would ask: What explains the significant

gender, racial, age, and geographic differences in gun ownership? How would these differences affect the formulation of social policy by municipal, provincial, and federal governments? They would examine data from different provinces in the country to evaluate the effect of gun control on the incidence of firearm accidents or violent crimes involving firearms. They would consider how cultural values and media portrayals influence people's desire to own firearms. Sociologists might also look at data that show how Canada compares to other nations in firearm ownership and use.

## Sociology and Common Sense

Sociology focuses on the study of social behaviour. Yet we all have experience with human behaviour and at least some knowledge of it. All of us might well have theories about why people buy lottery tickets, for example, or why people become homeless. Our theories and opinions typically come from “common sense”—that is, from our experiences and conversations, from what we read, from what we see on television, and so forth.

In our daily lives, we rely on common sense to get us through many unfamiliar situations. However, this commonsensical knowledge, while sometimes accurate, is not always reliable, because it rests on commonly held beliefs rather than on systematic analysis. It was once considered “common sense” to accept the idea that the earth was flat—a view rightly questioned by Pythagoras and Aristotle. Incorrect commonsensical notions are not just a part of the distant past; they remain with us today.

“Common sense” tells us that young people today are “out of control” and are committing more crime and more violent crime. We hear parents speak of the “olden days” when kids knew how to behave, when they respected their elders. We hear and read in the media about groups of young people ganging up on lone youngsters, bullying them, “curbing” them, and in what seems like increasing instances, killing them. However, these particular “commonsense” notions—like the notion that the earth is flat—are untrue; neither of them is supported by sociological research.

What *does* research have to tell us about these questions? Official crime statistics gathered by the Uniform Crime Reporting System indicate that youth and adult crime rates increased between 1962 and 1990 (Statistics Canada 1992). While it is entirely possible that youth did commit more crimes during this period, it is also likely that other factors—not directly related to criminal behaviour—influenced the numbers. During this time period, Canadians witnessed the passage of the Young Offender Act, which created new categories of offences for young people. This meant that where previously there was technically no law to break, now there was. This alone would cause an increase in the number of youth charged. The public during this time called for a stricter

response to “troublesome” young people. The result? Police officers were more likely to charge youngsters and the courts were more likely to prosecute and convict them. So changes in legislation, policing, administration, and public attitudes contributed to the increase in youth crime.

The reality is that youth crime steadily decreased during the 1990s. In fact, in 1999, the rate of youths charged was 21 percent lower than a decade earlier (Statistics Canada 2001b). While youth violent crime rates increased slightly (2 percent) in 2001, the increase was mainly for minor assaults between acquaintances (most likely school yard altercations, which are more likely to be reported to authorities in an era characterized by zero tolerance for touching and fighting). While common sense indicates that youth crime is increasing and getting worse, a careful analysis of the issue reveals that this conclusion is misleading.

Like other social scientists, sociologists do not accept something as a fact because “everyone knows it.” Instead, each piece of information must be tested and recorded, then analyzed in relationship to other data. Sociologists rely on scientific studies to describe and understand a social environment. At times, the findings of sociologists may seem like common sense because they deal with aspects of everyday life. The difference is that such findings have been *tested* by researchers. Common sense now tells us that the earth is round. But this particular commonsensical notion is based on centuries of scientific work that upholds the breakthroughs made by Pythagoras and Aristotle.

## WHAT IS SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY?

Why do people commit suicide? One traditional commonsensical answer is that people inherit the desire to kill themselves. Another view is that sunspots drive people to take their own lives. These explanations may not seem especially convincing to contemporary researchers, but they represent beliefs widely held as recently as 1900.

Sociologists are not particularly interested in why any one individual commits suicide; they are more concerned with identifying the social forces that systematically cause some people to take their own lives. To undertake this research, sociologists develop a theory that offers a general explanation of suicidal behaviour.

We can think of theories as attempts to explain events, forces, materials, ideas, or behaviour in a comprehensive manner. Within sociology, a *theory* is a set of statements that seeks to explain problems, actions, or behaviour. An effective theory may have both explanatory and predictive power. That is, it can help us to see the relationships among seemingly isolated phenomena, as well as to understand how one type of change in an environment leads to others.

Émile Durkheim ([1897] 1951) looked into suicide data in great detail and developed a highly original theory about the relationship between



suicide and social factors. He was primarily concerned not with the personalities of individual suicide victims, but rather with suicide *rates* and how they varied from country to country. As a result, when he looked at the number of reported suicides in France, England, and Denmark in 1869, he noted the total population of each country so that he could determine the rate of suicide in each. He found that whereas England had only 67 reported suicides per million inhabitants, France had 135 per million and Denmark had 277 per million. The question then became: “Why did Denmark have a comparatively high rate of reported suicides?”

Durkheim went much deeper into his investigation of suicide rates; the result was his landmark work *Suicide*, published in 1897. Durkheim refused to automatically accept unproven explanations regarding suicide, including the beliefs that cosmic forces or inherited tendencies caused such deaths. Instead, he focused on such problems as the cohesiveness or lack of cohesiveness of religious, social, and occupational groups.

Durkheim’s research suggested that suicide, while a solitary act, is related to group life. Protestants had much higher suicide rates than Catholics; the unmarried had much higher rates than married people; soldiers were more likely to take their lives than civilians. In addition, there seemed to be higher rates of suicide in times of peace than in times of war and revolution, and in times of economic instability and recession rather than in times of prosperity. Durkheim concluded that the suicide rate of a society reflected the extent to which people were or were not integrated into the group life of the society.

Émile Durkheim, like many other social scientists, developed a theory to explain how individual behaviour can be understood within a social context. He pointed out the influence of groups and societal forces on what had always been viewed as a highly personal act. Clearly, Durkheim offered a more *scientific* explanation for the causes of suicide than that of sunspots or inherited tendencies. His theory has predictive power, since it suggests that suicide rates will rise or fall in conjunction with certain social and economic changes.

## HOW DID SOCIOLOGY DEVELOP?

People have always been curious about sociological matters—such as how we get along with others, what we do for a living, and whom we select as our leaders. Philosophers and religious authorities of ancient and medieval societies made countless observations about human behaviour. They did not test or verify their observations scientifically; nevertheless, those observations often became the foundation for moral codes. Several of the early social philosophers predicted that a systematic study of human behaviour would one day emerge. Beginning in the nineteenth century, European theorists made pioneering contributions to the development of a science of human behaviour.



## Early Thinkers: Comte, Martineau, and Spencer

The nineteenth century was an unsettled time in France. The French monarchy had been deposed in the revolution of 1789, and Napoleon had subsequently suffered defeat in his effort to conquer Europe. Amid this chaos, philosophers considered how society might be improved. Auguste Comte (1798–1857), credited with being the most influential of the philosophers of the early 1800s, believed that a theoretical science of society and a systematic investigation of behaviour were needed to improve French society. He coined the term *sociology* to apply to the science of human behaviour.

Writing in the 1800s, Comte feared that the excesses of the French Revolution had permanently impaired France's stability. Yet he hoped that the systematic study of social behaviour would eventually lead to more rational human interactions. In Comte's hierarchy of sciences, sociology was at the top. He called it the "queen," and its practitioners "scientist-priests." This French theorist did not simply give sociology its name; he also presented a rather ambitious challenge to the fledgling discipline.

Scholars learned of Comte's works largely through translations by the English sociologist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). As a sociologist, Martineau was a pathbreaker in her own right. She offered insightful observations of the customs and social practices of both her native Britain and the United States. Martineau's book *Society in America* ([1837] 1962) examines religion, politics, child rearing, and immigration in the young nation. Martineau gives special attention to social class distinctions and to such factors as gender and race.

Martineau's writings emphasized the impact that the economy, law, trade, and population could have on the social problems of contemporary society. She spoke out in favour of the rights of women, the emancipation of slaves, and religious tolerance. In Martineau's (1896) view, intellectuals and scholars should not simply offer observations of social conditions; they should act on their convictions in a manner that will benefit society. That is why Martineau conducted research on the nature of female employment and pointed to the need for further investigation of the issue (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998).

Another important contributor to the discipline of sociology was Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). A relatively prosperous Victorian Englishman, Spencer (unlike Martineau) did not feel compelled to correct or improve society; instead, he merely hoped to understand it better. Drawing on Charles Darwin's study *On the Origin of Species*, Spencer applied the concept of evolution of the species to societies to explain how they change, or evolve, over time. Similarly, he adapted Darwin's evolutionary view of the "survival of the fittest" by arguing that it is "natural" that some people are rich while others are poor.

Spencer's approach to societal change was extremely popular in his own lifetime. Unlike Comte, Spencer suggested that since societies are

bound to change eventually, one need not be highly critical of present social arrangements or work actively for social change. This viewpoint appealed to many influential people in England and the United States who had a vested interest in the status quo and were suspicious of social thinkers who endorsed change.

## Émile Durkheim

Émile Durkheim made many pioneering contributions to sociology, including his important theoretical work on suicide. The son of a rabbi, Durkheim (1858–1917) was educated in both France and Germany. He established an impressive academic reputation and was appointed one of the first professors of sociology in France. Above all, Durkheim will be remembered for his insistence that behaviour must be understood within a larger social context, not just in individualistic terms.

As one example of this emphasis, Durkheim ([1912] 2001) developed a fundamental thesis to help understand all forms of society. Through intensive study of the Arunta, an Australian tribe, he focused on the functions that religion performs and underscored the role that group life plays in defining what we consider to be religious. Durkheim concluded that like other forms of group behaviour, religion reinforces a group's solidarity.

Like many other sociologists, Durkheim did not limit his interests to one aspect of social behaviour. Later in this book, we will consider his thinking on crime and punishment, religion, and the workplace. Few sociologists have had such a dramatic impact on so many different areas within the discipline.

## Max Weber

Another important early theorist was Max Weber (pronounced “VAY-ber”). Born in Germany in 1864, Weber studied legal and economic history, but he gradually developed an interest in sociology. Eventually, he became a professor at various German universities. Weber taught his students that they should employ *Verstehen*, the German word for “understanding” or “insight,” in their intellectual work. He pointed out that we cannot analyze much of our social behaviour by the same criteria we use to measure weight or temperature. To fully comprehend social behaviour, we must learn the subjective meanings people attach to their actions—how they themselves view and explain their behaviour.

We also owe credit to Weber for a key conceptual tool: the ideal type. An *ideal type* is a construct, a made-up model that serves as a measuring rod against which actual cases can be evaluated. In his own works, Weber identified various characteristics of bureaucracy as an ideal type (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). In presenting this model of bureaucracy, Weber was not describing any particular organization, nor was he using the term *ideal* in a way that suggested a positive evaluation. Instead, his

purpose was to provide a useful standard for measuring how bureaucratic an actual organization is (Gerth and Mills 1958). Later in this textbook, we will use the concept of an ideal type to study the family, religion, authority, and economic systems and to analyze bureaucracy.

## Karl Marx

Karl Marx (1818–1883) shared with Durkheim and Weber a dual interest in abstract philosophical issues and the concrete reality of everyday life. Unlike them, Marx was so critical of existing institutions that a conventional academic career was impossible for him. He spent most of his life in exile from his native Germany.

Marx's personal life was a difficult struggle. When a paper that he had written was suppressed, he fled to France. In Paris, he met Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), with whom he formed a lifelong friendship. The two lived at a time when European and North American economic life was increasingly dominated by the factory rather than the farm.

In 1847, Marx and Engels attended secret meetings in London of an illegal coalition of labour unions known as the Communist League. The following year, they prepared a platform called *The Communist Manifesto*, in which they argued that the masses of people who have no resources other than their labour (whom they referred to as the *proletariat*) should unite to fight for the overthrow of capitalist societies.

In Marx's analysis, society was fundamentally divided between classes that clash in pursuit of their own class interests. When he examined the industrial societies of his time, such as Germany, England, and the United States, he saw the factory as the centre of conflict between the exploiters (the owners of the means of production) and the exploited (the workers). Marx viewed these relationships in systematic terms; that is, he believed that an entire system of economic, social, and political relationships maintained the power and dominance of the owners over the workers. Consequently, Marx and Engels argued, the working class needed to *overthrow* the existing class system. Marx's influence on contemporary thinking has been dramatic. His writings inspired those who were later to lead communist revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

Even apart from the political revolutions that his work fostered, Marx's contribution is profound. Marx emphasized the *group* identifications and associations that influence an individual's place in society. This area of study is the major focus of contemporary sociology. Throughout this textbook, we will consider how membership in a particular gender classification, age group, ethnic group, or economic class affects a person's attitudes and behaviours. In an important sense, we can trace this way of understanding society back to the pioneering work of Karl Marx.

## Modern Developments

Sociology today builds on the firm foundation developed by Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. However, the discipline has certainly not remained stagnant over the last 100 years. While Europeans have continued to make contributions, sociologists from throughout the world have advanced sociological theory and research. Their new insights have helped us to better understand the workings of society.

Sociology in North America is comparatively young. The first department of sociology in the United States was established at the University of Chicago in 1892. The first Canadian department of sociology officially opened in 1922 at McGill University in Montreal, though courses in sociology had been offered at the University of Manitoba and in the Maritimes prior to this date (Henslin et al. 2004). Given the longer history of American sociology, it is not surprising that North American sociology has a distinctly American flavour. Many of the “classic” sociologists were borne out of the American sociological tradition. Charles Horton Cooley, Jane Addams, and Robert Merton are only three such sociologists.

**Charles Horton Cooley.** Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) was typical of the sociologists who came to prominence in the early 1900s. Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Cooley received his graduate training in economics, but later became a sociology professor at the University of Michigan. Like other early sociologists, he had become interested in this “new” discipline while pursuing a related area of study.

Cooley shared the desire of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx to learn more about society. But to do so effectively, he preferred to use the sociological perspective to look first at smaller units—intimate, face-to-face groups such as families, gangs, and friendship networks. He saw these groups as the seedbeds of society, in the sense that they shape people’s ideals, beliefs, values, and social nature. Cooley’s work increased our understanding of groups of relatively small size.

**Jane Addams.** In the early 1900s, many leading sociologists in the United States saw themselves as social reformers dedicated to systematically studying and then improving a corrupt society. They were genuinely concerned about the lives of immigrants in the nation’s growing cities, whether those immigrants came from Europe or from the rural American south. Early female sociologists, in particular, often took active roles in poor urban areas as leaders of community centres known as settlement houses. For example, Jane Addams (1860–1935), a member of the American Sociological Society, cofounded the famous Chicago settlement, Hull House.

Addams and other pioneering female sociologists commonly combined intellectual inquiry, social service work, and political activism—

all with the goal of assisting the underprivileged and creating a more egalitarian society.

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the focus of the discipline had shifted. Sociologists for the most part restricted themselves to theorizing and gathering information; the aim of transforming society was left to social workers and others. This shift away from social reform was accompanied by a growing commitment to scientific methods of research and to value-free interpretation of data. Not all sociologists were happy with this emphasis.

**Robert Merton.** Sociologist Robert Merton (1910–2003) made an important contribution to the field by successfully combining theory and research.

Merton produced a theory that is one of the most frequently cited explanations of deviant behaviour. He noted different ways in which people attempt to achieve success in life. In his view, some may deviate from the socially agreed-upon goal of accumulating material goods or the socially accepted means of achieving that goal. For example, in Merton's classification scheme, "innovators" are people who accept the goal of pursuing material wealth but use illegal means to do so, including robbery, burglary, and extortion. Merton based his explanation of crime on individual behaviour—influenced by society's approved goals and means—yet it has wider applications. It helps to account for the high crime rates among the nation's poor, who may see no hope of advancing themselves through traditional roads to success. Chapter 4 discusses Merton's theory in greater detail.

Today sociology reflects the diverse contributions of earlier theorists. Despite the dominance of American sociological traditions, Canadian sociology has developed its own unique approach. According to Ravelli (2004), the four defining features of Canadian sociology are: the influence of Canada's geography and regionalism on sociological work (including hardships presented by the size and climate of Canada, regional differences, and multiculturalism), a focus on political economy (involving the intersection of politics, government, markets, institutions, and actors), the Canadianization movement in Canadian universities in the 1960s (a move toward training and hiring Canadian sociologists, sparked by a realization that most sociologists in these institutions were trained in the United States), and the radical nature of Canadian sociology (involving questioning the status quo, exposing power structures, and incorporating feminism in both the content and method of sociological inquiry).

Some well known Canadian sociologists credited with strongly influencing sociology in our country include Carl Dawson, who was instrumental in establishing the first sociology department at McGill. Harold A. Innis is probably best known for his work in political economy, specifically his emphasis on how Canadian economic development was

dependent on resource extraction and exportation (referred to as the staple approach). John Porter's *The Vertical Mosaic* (1965) is a classic sociological work describing inequality and economic and political relations between Canada's two Charter groups (the British and the French). Wallace Clement, another pre-eminent sociologist, whose work focuses on political economy, has investigated issues relating to corporate elites in Canada and elsewhere. Prominent feminists Margrit Eichler and Dorothy Smith are recognized for their work in nonsexist research methods, and the everyday realities of women and men respectively. They have strongly influenced the radical nature of Canadian sociology. As sociologists approach such topics as divorce, drug addiction, and religious cults, they can draw on the theoretical insights of the discipline's pioneers. In describing the work of today's sociologists, it is helpful to examine a number of influential theoretical approaches (also known as *perspectives*).

## WHAT ARE THE MAJOR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES?

Sociologists view society in different ways. Some see the world basically as a stable and ongoing entity. They are impressed with the endurance of family, organized religion, and other social institutions. Some sociologists see society in terms of many groups in conflict, competing for scarce resources. To other sociologists, the most fascinating aspects of the social world are the everyday, routine interactions among individuals that we often take for granted. Still others focus on how inequalities based on gender are the products of biology, social, historical and cultural factors. These gender-based inequalities are further complicated by factors such as age and ethnicity. These four views, the ones most widely used by sociologists, are the functionalist, conflict, interactionist, and feminist perspectives. Together, they will provide an introductory look at the discipline.

### Functionalist Perspective

Think of society as a living organism in which each part of the organism contributes to its survival. This view is the ***functionalist perspective*** (also referred to as the *structural functionalist approach*). The functionalist perspective emphasizes the way that the parts of a society are structured to maintain its stability.

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), a Harvard University sociologist, was a key figure in the development of functionalist theory. Parsons was greatly influenced by the work of Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and other European sociologists. For over four decades, Parsons dominated sociology in the United States with his advocacy of functionalism. He saw any society as a vast network of connected parts, each of which

helps to maintain the system as a whole. According to the functionalist approach, if an aspect of social life does not contribute to a society's stability or survival—if it does not serve some identifiably useful function or promote value consensus among members of a society—it will not be passed on from one generation to the next.

Let's examine prostitution as an example of the functionalist perspective. Why is it that a practice so widely condemned continues to display such persistence and vitality? Functionalists suggest that prostitution satisfies needs that may not be readily met through more socially acceptable forms of behaviour, such as courtship or marriage. The "buyer" receives sex without any responsibility for procreation or sentimental attachment; at the same time, the "seller" makes a living through the exchange.

Such an examination leads us to conclude that prostitution does perform certain functions that society seems to need. However, that is not to suggest that prostitution is a desirable or legitimate form of social behaviour. Functionalists do not make such judgments. Rather, advocates of the functionalist perspective hope to explain how an aspect of society that is so frequently attacked can nevertheless manage to survive (K. Davis 1937).

**Manifest and Latent Functions.** A college catalogue or university calendar typically states various functions of the institution. It may inform you, for example, that the university intends to "offer each student a broad education in classical and contemporary thought, in the humanities, in the sciences, and in the arts." However, it would be quite a surprise to find a catalogue that declared, "This university was founded in 1895 to keep people between the ages of 18 and 22 out of the job market, thus reducing unemployment." No university calendar will declare that as the purpose of the university. Yet societal institutions serve many functions, some of them quite subtle. The university, in fact, *does* delay people's entry into the job market.

Robert Merton (1968) made an important distinction between manifest and latent functions. *Manifest functions* of institutions are open, stated, conscious functions. They involve the intended, recognized consequences of an aspect of society, such as the university's role in certifying academic competence and excellence. By contrast, *latent functions* are unconscious or unintended functions that may reflect hidden purposes of an institution. One latent function of universities is to hold down unemployment. Another is to serve as a meeting ground for people seeking marital partners.

## Conflict Perspective

In contrast to the functionalists' emphasis on stability and consensus, conflict sociologists see the social world in continual struggle. Proponents of the *conflict perspective* assume that social behaviour is



best understood in terms of conflict or tension between competing groups. Such conflict need not be violent; it can take the form of labour negotiations, party politics, competition between religious groups for members, or disputes over the federal budget.

Throughout most of the 1900s, advocates of the functionalist perspective had the upper hand among sociologists in North America. However, proponents of the conflict approach have become increasingly persuasive since the late 1960s. The widespread social unrest resulting from battles over civil rights, bitter divisions over the war in Vietnam, the rise of the feminist and gay liberation movements, urban riots, and confrontations at abortion clinics offered support for the conflict approach—the view that our social world is characterized by continual struggle between competing groups.

**The Marxist View.** As we saw earlier, Karl Marx viewed the struggle between social classes as inevitable, given the exploitation of workers under capitalism. Expanding on Marx’s work, sociologists and other social scientists have come to see conflict not merely as a class phenomenon but as a part of everyday life in all societies. In studying any culture, organization, or social group, sociologists want to know who benefits, who suffers, and who dominates at the expense of others. They are concerned with the conflicts between women and men, parents and children, cities and suburbs, different ethnic or religious groups, to name only a few. Conflict theorists are interested in how society’s institutions—including the family, government, religion, education, and the media—may help to maintain the privileges of some groups and keep others in a subservient position. Their emphasis on social change and the redistribution of resources makes conflict theorists more “radical” and “activist” than functionalists (Dahrendorf 1959).

**A Different Voice: W. E. B. Du Bois.** One important contribution of conflict theory is that it has encouraged sociologists to view society through the eyes of those segments of the population that rarely influence decision making. Some black sociologists, including W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), conducted research that they hoped would assist in the struggle for a racially egalitarian society. Du Bois believed that knowledge was essential to combating prejudice and achieving tolerance and justice. Sociologists, he contended, must draw on scientific principles to study social problems such as those experienced by blacks in the United States, in order to separate accepted opinion from fact. He himself documented blacks’ relatively low status in Philadelphia and Atlanta. Through his in-depth studies of urban life, both white and black, Du Bois made a major contribution to sociology.

## Feminist Perspective

Sociologists began embracing the feminist perspective in the 1970s, although it has a long tradition in many other disciplines. Proponents of the *feminist perspective* view inequity based on gender as central to all behaviour and organization. Because of its focus on inequality, the feminist perspective is often considered part of the conflict perspective. We distinguish it as a separate sociological perspective because of its distinctiveness in terms of content and method. Feminist sociologists explore the use of many different methods of doing research. Beyond this they focus on gender disparities and the implications these inequalities have for the everyday lives of women, men, and families. There are different types of feminist theories including Marxist feminism, liberal feminism, and radical feminism, each with their own distinct focus and stance on gender relations. Whatever the particular strain of feminist theory, they broadly share the view that biological sex differences are exacerbated by complex historical, cultural, and social processes, that the gender division of labour is a hierarchical one with men receiving more rewards than women, that sociology has long been dominated by the male perspective and male ways of knowing, and that changes, whether gradual or radical, are required to achieve equality between the sexes.

Feminist scholarship has broadened our understanding of social behaviour by taking it beyond the white male point of view. Many feminist researchers look at how gender, ethnicity, and social class interact to influence the distribution of power in society. Dorothy Smith, a major figure in Canadian feminist theory and methodology, helped revolutionize the discipline by first critiquing traditional, male-centred sociology and then offering another way of doing sociology, one that builds an account of how things work against women and other oppressed people. Smith argued that there are different standpoints, different “ways of knowing,” and that when people get caught up in seeing things one way only (male-centred), and give authority to that one way of looking at the world, we lose valuable sources of insight and knowledge—those which are silenced by this process (women’s perspectives) (Smith 1975, 1990; Campbell 2003). Feminist scholars have not only challenged stereotyping of women; they have argued for a gender-balanced study of society in which women’s experiences and contributions are as visible as those of men (England 1999; Komarovsky 1991; Smith 1987, 1990; Tuchman 1992).

## Interactionist Perspective

Workers interacting on the job, encounters in public places like bus stops and parks, behaviour in small groups—these are all aspects of microsociology that catch the attention of interactionists. Whereas functionalist and conflict theorists both analyze large-scale, societywide patterns of behaviour, proponents of the *interactionist perspective* generalize about

everyday forms of social interaction to understand society as a whole. In the 1990s, for example, the workings of juries became a subject of public scrutiny. High-profile trials ended in verdicts that left some people shaking their heads. Long before jury members were being interviewed on their front lawns following trials, interactionists tried to better understand behaviour in the small-group setting of a jury deliberation room.

While the functionalist and conflict approaches were initiated in Europe, interactionism developed first in the United States. George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is widely regarded as the founder of the interactionist perspective. Mead taught at the University of Chicago from 1893 until his death. His sociological analysis, like that of Charles Horton Cooley, often focused on human interactions within one-to-one situations and small groups. Mead was interested in observing the most minute forms of communication—smiles, frowns, the nodding of one’s head—and in understanding how such individual behaviour was influenced by the larger context of a group or society. Despite his innovative views, Mead only occasionally wrote articles, and never a book. He was an extremely popular teacher; in fact, most of his insights have come to us through edited volumes of lectures that his students published after his death.

Interactionism is a sociological framework in which human beings are seen to be living in a world of meaningful objects. These “objects” may include material things, actions, other people, relationships, and even symbols. The interactionist perspective is sometimes referred to as the *symbolic interactionist perspective*, because interactionists see symbols as an especially important part of human communication. Symbols carry shared social meanings that are generally recognized by all members of a society. However, some symbols carry different meanings for different groups of people. To some people in Canada, for example, the Canadian flag symbolizes respect for their rich cultural heritage; to others, perhaps some residents of Quebec, it represents the subjugation of their culture, language, and distinctiveness.

Different cultures may use different symbols to convey the same idea. For example, consider the different ways various societies portray suicide without the use of words. People in North America point a finger at the head (shooting); urban Japanese bring a fist against the stomach (stabbing); and the South Fore of Papua, New Guinea, clench a hand at the throat (hanging). These symbolic interactions are classified as a form of *nonverbal communication*, which can include many other gestures, facial expressions, and postures.

## The Sociological Approach

Which perspective should a sociologist use in studying human behaviour? Functionalist? Conflict? Feminist? Interactionist? The perspective a sociologist uses depends in part on his or her worldview. In some ways it is similar to political party affiliation. Identification with views that are



What symbols at your college or university have special meaning for you? Why?

## SUMMING UP

**Table 1-1** Comparing Major Theoretical Perspectives

	<b>Functionalist</b>	<b>Conflict</b>	<b>Feminist</b>	<b>Interactionist</b>
<i>View of society</i>	Stable, well integrated	Characterized by tension and struggle between groups	Characterized by a gendered division of labour where women’s work is subordinate to men’s work	Active in influencing everyday social interaction
<i>View of the individual</i>	People are socialized to perform societal functions	People are shaped by power, coercion, and authority	People are shaped by power differentials inherent to gender relations	People manipulate symbols and create their social worlds through interaction
<i>View of the social order</i>	Maintained through cooperation and consensus	Maintained through force and coercion	Maintained through biological, social, historical, and cultural conceptions of gender	Maintained by shared understanding of everyday behaviour
<i>View of social change</i>	Predictable, reinforcing	Change takes place all the time and may have positive consequences	Change is necessary and ongoing to remove barriers to equality between the genders	Reflected in people’s social positions and their communications with others
<i>Example</i>	Public punishments reinforce the social order	Laws reinforce the positions of those in power	Laws reinforce gender inequality by favouring males	People respect laws or disobey them based on their own past experience

Conservative, Liberal, New Democratic, Communist, or some other political perspective is influenced by many things including biography, experience, history, and perception. In fact, sociologists make use of all the perspectives summarized in Table 1–1, since each offers unique insights into the same issue. Similar to political perspectives, we can gain the broadest understanding of our society, then, by drawing on all the major perspectives, noting where they overlap and where they diverge. Regardless of the specific sociological approach used, sociologists also incorporate a global perspective in their work. Increasingly cultures, groups, and individuals in Canada are linked to others in South America, Europe, China, and around the world. Sociologists are aware of the fact that human behaviour in one part of the world has implications for and influences on human behaviour elsewhere. Nowhere perhaps was this more evident than with the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the events occurring afterward.

Although no one approach is “correct,” and sociologists draw on all of



**Consider the topic of sports, amateur or professional. What would each of the four perspectives discussed above have to say about sports?**

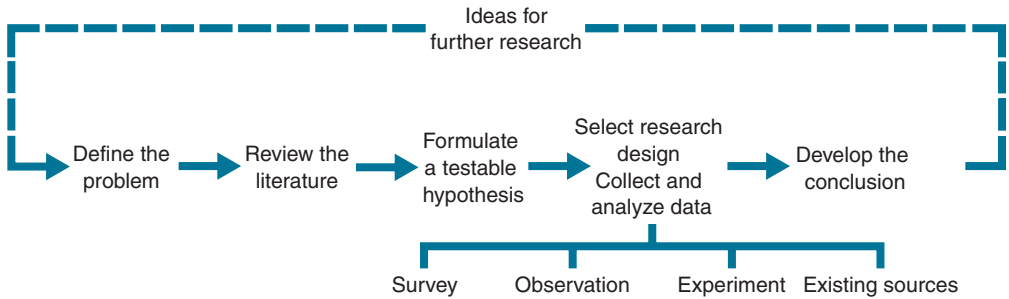
them for various purposes, many sociologists tend to favour one particular perspective over others. A sociologist's theoretical orientation influences his or her approach to a research problem in important ways. The choice of what to study, how to study it, and what questions to pose (or not to pose) can all be influenced by a researcher's theoretical orientation. In the next part of this chapter, we will see how sociologists have adapted the scientific method to their discipline and how they apply that method in surveys, case observations, and experiments. Bear in mind, though, that even with meticulous attention to all the steps in the scientific method, a researcher's work will always be guided by his or her theoretical viewpoint. Research results, like theories, shine a spotlight on one road in our journey, leaving other roads in relative darkness.

## WHAT IS THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD?

Like all of us, sociologists are interested in the central questions of our time. Is the family falling apart? Why is there so much crime in North America? Is the world lagging behind in its ability to feed the population? Such issues concern most people, whether or not they have academic training. However, unlike the typical citizen, the sociologist is committed to using the scientific method in studying society. The *scientific method* is a systematic, organized series of steps that ensures maximum objectivity and consistency in researching a problem.

Many of us will never actually conduct scientific research. Why, then, is it important that we understand the scientific method? Because it plays a major role in the workings of our society. Residents of Canada are constantly being bombarded with “facts” or “data.” A television reporter informs us that “one in every two marriages in this country now ends in divorce.” An advertiser cites supposedly scientific studies to prove that a particular product is superior. Such claims may be accurate or exaggerated. We can better evaluate such information—and will not be fooled so easily—if we are familiar with the standards of scientific research. These standards are quite stringent and demand as strict adherence as possible.

The scientific method requires precise preparation in developing useful research. Otherwise, the research data collected may not prove accurate. Sociologists and other researchers follow five basic steps in the scientific method: (1) defining the problem, (2) reviewing the literature, (3) formulating the hypothesis, (4) selecting the research design and then collecting and analyzing data, and (5) developing the conclusion (see Figure 1–1). We'll use an actual example to illustrate the workings of the scientific method.



**Figure 1–1**  
The Scientific Method

## Defining the Problem

Does it “pay” to go to college or university? Some people make great sacrifices and work hard to get a college or university education. Parents borrow money for their children’s tuition. Students work part-time jobs or even take full-time positions while attending evening or weekend classes. Does it pay off? Are there monetary returns for getting that degree?

The first step in any research project is to state as clearly as possible what you hope to investigate—that is, *define the problem*. In this instance, we are interested in knowing how schooling relates to income. We want to find out the earnings of people with different levels of formal schooling. Early on, any social science researcher must develop an operational definition of each concept being studied. An **operational definition** is an explanation of an abstract concept that is specific enough to allow a researcher to assess the concept, to measure it. For example, a sociologist interested in status might use membership in exclusive social clubs as an operational definition of status. Someone studying prejudice might consider a person’s unwillingness to hire or work with members of minority groups as an operational definition of prejudice. In our example, we need to develop two operational definitions—one for education and the other for earnings—to study whether it pays to get advanced educational degrees.

Initially, we will walk down the functionalist road (although we may end up exploring other theoretical roads). We will argue that opportunities for more earning power are related to level of schooling and that schools prepare students for employment.

## Reviewing the Literature

By conducting a *review of the literature*—the relevant scholarly studies and information—researchers refine the problem under study, clarify possible techniques to be used in collecting data, and eliminate or reduce avoidable mistakes. In our example, we would examine information about the salaries for different occupations. We would see if jobs that

require more academic training are better rewarded. It would also be appropriate to review other studies on the relationship between education and income.

The review of the literature would soon tell us that many other factors besides years of schooling influence earning potential. For example, we would learn that the children of richer parents are more likely to go to college or university than those from modest backgrounds. As a result, we might consider the possibility that those parents may also help their children to secure better-paying jobs after graduation.

## Formulating the Hypothesis

After reviewing earlier research and drawing on the contributions of sociological theorists, the researchers may then *formulate the hypothesis*. A **hypothesis** is a speculative statement about the relationship between two or more factors known as *variables*. Income, religion, occupation, and gender can all serve as variables in a study. We can define a **variable** as a measurable trait or characteristic that is subject to change under different conditions.

Researchers who formulate a hypothesis generally must suggest how one aspect of human behaviour influences or affects another. The variable hypothesized to cause or influence another is called the **independent variable**. The second variable is termed the **dependent variable** because its action “depends” on the influence of the independent variable.

Our hypothesis is that the higher one’s educational degree, the more money a person will earn. The independent variable that is to be measured is the level of educational degree. The variable that is thought to “depend” on it—income—must also be measured.

Identifying independent and dependent variables is a critical step in clarifying cause-and-effect relationships. **Causal logic** involves the relationship between a condition or variable and a particular consequence, with one event leading to the other. Under causal logic, being less integrated into society (the independent variable) may be directly related to or produce a greater likelihood of suicide (the dependent variable). Similarly, parents’ income levels (an independent variable) may affect the likelihood that their children will enroll in college or university (a dependent variable). Later in life, the level of education their children achieve (independent variable) may be directly related to their children’s income levels (dependent variable). Note that income level can be either an independent or a dependent variable, depending on the causal relationship.

A **correlation** exists when a change in one variable coincides with a change in the other. Correlations are an indication that causality *may* be present; they do not necessarily indicate causation. For example, data indicate that aboriginal people in Canada are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Statistics indicate their representation in prison



is up to three or four times their representation in the general population. Can we conclude that an aboriginal heritage *causes* criminal behaviour? Absolutely not! To establish causation we would have to first rule out many other variables. For example, aboriginal people are more likely to experience higher levels of inadequate education, substance abuse, family violence, sexual and physical abuse, and unemployment as a result of their marginal status in society. Research shows that these factors are linked to criminal behaviour, regardless of ethnicity. Furthermore, discrimination by members of the public and agents of social control (police officers, probation and parole offices, judges, the general public), might also influence the higher rates of reporting, charging, arrest, and incarceration that aboriginal people as a group experience. In combination, all of these factors are influential in overrepresentation of aboriginal people in the criminal justice system. While overrepresentation is correlated with aboriginal group membership, any causal connection is questionable and can be explained by these other factors.

## Collecting and Analyzing Data

How do you test a hypothesis to determine if it is supported or refuted? You need to collect information, using one of the research designs described later in the chapter. The research design guides the researcher in collecting and analyzing data.

**Selecting the Sample.** In most studies, social scientists must carefully select what is known as a *sample*. A *sample* is a selection from a larger population that is statistically representative of that population. There are many kinds of samples, but the one social scientists use most frequently is the random sample. In a *random sample*, every member of an entire population being studied has the same chance of being selected. Thus, if researchers want to examine the opinions of people listed in a city directory (a book that, unlike the telephone directory, lists all households), they might use a computer to randomly select names from the directory. This selection would constitute a random sample. The advantage of using specialized sampling techniques is that sociologists do not need to question everyone in a population.

It is all too easy to confuse the careful scientific techniques used in representative sampling with the many *nonscientific* polls that receive much more media attention. For example, television viewers and radio listeners are encouraged to email their views on today's headlines or on political contests. Such polls reflect nothing more than the views of those who happened to see the television program (or hear the radio broadcast) and took the time, perhaps at some cost, to register their opinions. These data do not necessarily reflect (and indeed may distort) the views of the broader population. Not everyone has access to a television or radio or has the time to watch or listen to a program or the means

and/or inclination to send email. Similar problems are raised by the “mail-back” questionnaires found in many magazines and by “mall intercepts,” in which shoppers are asked about some issue. Even when these techniques include answers from tens of thousands of people, they will be far less accurate than a carefully selected representative sample of 1,500 respondents.

For the purposes of our example, we will use information collected in the American General Social Survey (GSS). Since 1972, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) has conducted this national survey 24 times, most recently in 2002. Each time, a representative sample of the adult population is interviewed on a variety of topics for about one and a half hours. One of the authors of this book, Schaefer, examined the responses of the 2,765 people interviewed in 2002, especially concerning their level of education and income.

**Ensuring Validity and Reliability.** The scientific method requires that research results be both valid and reliable. *Validity* refers to the degree to which a scale or measure truly reflects the phenomenon under study. *Reliability* refers to the extent to which a measure produces consistent results. A valid measure of income depends on gathering accurate data. Various studies show that people are reasonably accurate in knowing how much money they earned in the most recent year. One problem of reliability is that some people may not *disclose* accurate information, but most do. In the General Social Survey, only 9 percent of the respondents refused to give their income, and another 5 percent said they did not know what their income was. That means 86 percent of the respondents gave their incomes, which we can assume were reasonably accurate (given their other responses about occupation and years in the labour force).

## Developing the Conclusion

Scientific studies, including those conducted by sociologists, do not aim to answer all the questions that can be raised about a particular subject. Therefore, the conclusion of a research study represents both an end and a beginning. It terminates a specific phase of the investigation, but it should also generate ideas for future study.

**Supporting Hypotheses.** In our example, we find that the data support our hypothesis: People with more formal schooling *do* earn more money. As Table 1–2 shows, as a group, those with a high school diploma earn more than those who failed to complete high school, but those with an associate’s degree earn more than high school graduates. The relationship continues through more advanced levels of schooling; those with graduate degrees earn the most.

**Table 1-2** Income by Education

Income Group	Educational Level (Percentage of Graduates in Each Income Group)				
	Less Than High School Education	High School Diploma	Associate's Degree	BA/BSc	Graduate Degree
Under \$15,000	50%	31%	11%	17%	11%
\$15,000–\$24,999	25	22	18	12	8
\$25,000–\$34,999	14	26	32	22	17
\$35,000–\$59,999	7	15	18	23	25
\$60,000 and over	4	6	21	26	39
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

SOURCE: Richard Schaefer's analysis of General Social Survey 2002 in J. A. Davis et al. 2003.

Sociological studies do not always generate data that support the original hypothesis. In many instances, a hypothesis is refuted, and researchers must reformulate their conclusions. Unexpected results may also lead sociologists to reexamine their methodology and make changes in the research design.

**Controlling for Other Factors.** A *control variable* is a factor held constant to test the relative impact of the independent variable. For example, if researchers wanted to know how adults in Canada feel about restrictions on smoking in public places, they would probably attempt to use a respondent's smoking behaviour as a control variable. That is, how do smokers versus nonsmokers feel about smoking in public places? The researchers would compile separate statistics on how smokers and nonsmokers feel about antismoking regulations.

Our study of the influence of education on income suggests that not everyone enjoys equal educational opportunities, a disparity that is one of the causes of social inequality. Since education affects a person's income, we may wish to walk down the conflict perspective road to explore this topic further. What impact does a person's race or gender have? Is a woman with a college degree likely to earn as much as a man with similar schooling? Later in this textbook we will consider these other factors and variables. We will examine the impact that education has on income, while controlling for variables such as gender and race.

## In Summary: The Scientific Method

Let's summarize the process of the scientific method through a review of our example. We *defined a problem* (the question of whether it pays to

get higher educational degrees). We *reviewed the literature* (other studies of the relationship between education and income) and *formulated a hypothesis* (the higher one's educational degree, the more money a person will earn). We *collected and analyzed the data*, making sure the sample was representative and the data were valid and reliable. Finally, we *developed the conclusion*: the data do support our hypothesis about the influence of education on income.

## HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS CONDUCT RESEARCH?

An important aspect of sociological research is deciding how to collect the data. A **research design** is a detailed plan or method for obtaining data scientifically. Selection of a research design requires creativity and ingenuity. This choice will directly influence both the cost of the project and the amount of time needed to collect the results of the research. Research designs that sociologists use regularly to generate data include surveys, observation, experiments, and existing sources.

### Surveys

Almost all of us have responded to surveys of one kind or another. We may have been asked what kind of detergent we use, which political candidate we intend to vote for, or what our favourite television program is. A **survey** is a study, generally in the form of an interview or questionnaire, that provides researchers with information about how people think and act. Among the best-known surveys of opinion are the Gallup poll and the Harris poll. As anyone who watches the news knows, these polls have become a staple of political life.

In preparing to conduct a survey, sociologists must not only develop representative samples; they must exercise great care in the wording of questions. An effective survey question must be simple and clear enough for people to understand. It must also be specific enough so that there are no problems in interpreting the results. Open-ended questions ("What do you think of the programming on educational television?") must be carefully phrased to solicit the type of information desired. Surveys can be indispensable sources of information, but only if the sampling is done properly and the questions are worded accurately and without bias.

There are two main forms of surveys: the **interview**, in which a researcher obtains information through face-to-face or telephone questioning, and the **questionnaire**, a printed or written form used to obtain information from a respondent. Each of these has its own advantages. An interviewer can obtain a high response rate, because people find it more difficult to turn down a personal request for an interview than to throw away a written questionnaire. In addition, a skillful interviewer can go beyond written questions and probe for a subject's underlying

feelings and reasons. On the other hand, questionnaires have the advantage of being cheaper, especially in large samples.

Surveys are an example of *quantitative research*, in which scientists collect and report data primarily in numerical form. Most of the survey research discussed so far in this book has been quantitative. While this type of research is appropriate for large samples, it doesn't offer great depth and detail on a topic. That is why researchers also make use of *qualitative research*, which relies on what scientists see in field and naturalistic settings. Qualitative research often focuses on small groups and communities rather than on large groups or whole nations. The most common form of qualitative research is *observation*.

## Observation

Investigators who collect information through direct participation in and/or closely watching a group or community under study are engaged in *observation*. This method allows sociologists to examine certain behaviours and communities that could not be investigated through other research techniques.

An increasingly popular form of qualitative research in sociology today is *ethnography*. *Ethnography* refers to the study of an entire social setting through extended, systematic observation. Typically, an ethnographic description emphasizes how the subjects themselves view their social reality. Anthropologists rely heavily on ethnography. Much as an anthropologist seeks to understand the people of some Polynesian island, the sociologist as ethnographer seeks to understand and present to us an entire way of life in some setting.

Daniel Wolf, during the 1980s, studied the Edmonton chapter of the Rebels outlaw biker group (1991). In this example of participant observation research, Wolf became part of the biker subculture. He bought a Harley Davidson motorcycle, donned biker attire, rode his bike with the Rebels, and hung out with them at various bars and events. He successfully gained access to the club, became a valued friend to many bikers, and was eventually invited to become a fully "patched" brother. At this point in the research process it became critical (ethically, personally, and in terms of his physical safety) for Wolf to inform the Rebels of his desire to document his experiences with the group into a research study. He grappled with the decision of how to tell his friends—outlaw bikers—that for the past three years he had been keeping this "secret" from them. At the same time he was committed to getting their permission before using any of the information in an academic manner. Luckily, "Wee Albert," one of the first friends he made in the group, who knew Wolf was a university student, suggested he write a study on the Rebels. After tabling the proposal to the entire Rebel membership at one of their meetings, permission was granted by the group for Wolf to turn his last three years of experiences with them into a doctoral dissertation. It all ended



Think of a group you would like to know more about. How would you go about studying the group? What would you have to do to be accepted by this group to learn more about them? How would you tell them you are a researcher trying to gain insight into their lifestyle?

well for Wolf, but not without much inner turmoil. Wolf's experience alerts us to the complexities of doing participant observation research: developing bonds of trust and loyalty with the group one studies can change the researcher's view not only of the group being studied, but also of his or her own social roles.

The initial challenge that Wolf faced—and that every participant observer encounters—was to gain acceptance into an unfamiliar group. It is no simple matter for a college-trained sociologist to win the trust of a religious cult, a youth gang, a poor Appalachian community, or a circle of skid row residents. Doing so requires a great deal of patience and an accepting, nonthreatening personality on the part of the observer.

Observation research poses other complex challenges for the investigator. Sociologists must be able to fully understand what they are observing. In a sense, then, researchers must learn to see the world as the group sees it to fully comprehend the events taking place around them.

## Experiments

When sociologists want to study a possible cause-and-effect relationship, they may conduct experiments. An *experiment* is an artificially created situation that allows the researcher to manipulate variables.

In the classic method of conducting an experiment, two groups of people are selected and matched for similar characteristics, such as age or education. The researchers then assign one of the groups to be the experimental group and the other to be the control group. The *experimental group* is exposed to an independent variable; the *control group* is not. Thus, if scientists were testing a new type of antibiotic drug, they would administer that drug to an experimental group but not to a control group.

Sociologists don't often rely on this classic form of experiment, because it generally involves manipulating human behaviour in an inappropriate manner, especially in a laboratory setting. However, sociologists do try to re-create experimental conditions in the field. For example, they may compare children's performance in two schools that follow different curricula.

In some experiments, just as in observation research, the presence of a social scientist or other observer may affect the behaviour of the people being studied. The recognition of this phenomenon grew out of an experiment conducted during the 1920s and 1930s at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company. A group of researchers set out to determine how to improve the productivity of workers at the plant. The investigators manipulated such variables as the lighting and working hours to see what impact the changes would have on productivity. To their surprise, they found that *every* step they took seemed to increase productivity. Even measures that seemed likely to have the opposite effect, such as reducing the amount of lighting in the plant, led to higher productivity.

Why did the plant's employees work harder even under less favourable conditions? Their behaviour apparently was influenced by the greater attention being paid to them in the course of the research and by the novelty of being subjects in an experiment. Since that time, sociologists have used the term *Hawthorne effect* to refer to the unintended influence of observers or experiments on subjects of research, who deviate from their typical behaviour because they realize that they are under observation (Lang 1992).



**You are a researcher interested in the effect of TV-watching on schoolchildren's grades. How would you go about setting up an experiment to measure the effect?**

## Use of Existing Sources

Sociologists do not necessarily need to collect new data to conduct research and test hypotheses. The term *secondary analysis* refers to a variety of research techniques that make use of previously collected and publicly accessible information and data. Generally, in conducting secondary analysis, researchers utilize data in ways unintended by the initial collectors of information. For example, census data that were compiled for specific uses by the federal government are also valuable to marketing specialists in locating everything from bicycle stores to nursing homes.

Sociologists consider secondary analysis to be *nonreactive*, since it does not influence people's behaviour. For example, Émile Durkheim's statistical analysis of suicide neither increased nor decreased human self-destruction.

Many social scientists find it useful to study cultural, economic, and political documents, including newspapers, periodicals, radio and television tapes, the Internet, scripts, diaries, songs, folklore, and legal papers, to name some examples. In examining these sources, researchers employ a technique known as *content analysis*, which is the systematic coding and objective recording of data, guided by some rationale.

Researchers today are analyzing the nature and extent of violence contained in children's television programming. In a recent study, they found that 69 percent of the shows specifically intended for children ages 12 and under contained violence. Though a comparison with non-children's programming showed little difference in the total amount of time devoted to violence, it did show that children's programs contain more scenes of violence than other programs (B. Wilson et al. 2002).

Table 1–3 on page 30 summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of the four major research designs.

## WHAT ARE THE ETHICS OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH?

A biochemist cannot inject a drug into a human being unless the drug has been thoroughly tested and the subject agrees to the shot. To do otherwise would be both unethical and illegal. Sociologists must also abide



## SUMMING UP

Table 1–3 Major Research Designs

Method	Examples	Advantages	Limitations
<i>Survey</i>	Questionnaires Interviews	Yields information about specific issues	Can be expensive and time-consuming
<i>Participant Observation</i>	Ethnography	Yields detailed information about specific groups or organizations	Involves months if not years of labour-intensive data gathering
<i>Experiment</i>	Deliberate manipulation of people's social behaviour	Yields direct measures of people's behaviour	Ethical limitations on the degree to which subjects' behaviour can be manipulated
<i>Existing sources/secondary analysis</i>	Analysis of census or health data Analysis of films or TV commercials	Cost-efficiency	Limited to data collected for some other purpose

by certain specific standards in conducting research, called a *code of ethics*. In 1994, the three major public research funding bodies in Canada—the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Medical Research Council (MRC), and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC)—began a consultation process that in 1998 culminated in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Public Works and Government Services 2003). This statement governs all sociological research in Canada. The ethical principles include the following:

1. Respect human dignity
2. Respect free and informed consent
3. Respect vulnerable persons
4. Respect privacy and confidentiality
5. Respect justice and inclusiveness
6. Balance harms and benefits
7. Minimize harm

Most sociological research uses *people* as sources of information—as respondents to survey questions, subjects of observation, or participants in experiments. In all cases, sociologists need to be certain that they are not invading the privacy of their subjects. Generally, they handle this responsibility by assuring them anonymity and by guaranteeing the confidentiality of personal information.

We have examined the process of sociological research, including related ethical considerations, in detail. But not all sociologists are

researchers. Some practice what has come to be known as applied sociology, or the application of sociological knowledge to real-world social problems.

## HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS “DO” SOCIOLOGY?

Sociology matters because it addresses real issues that affect people’s lives. Many early sociologists were strong advocates for social reform. They wanted their theories and findings to be relevant to policymakers and to people’s lives in general. For instance, Mead served on committees dealing with Chicago’s labour problems and with public education. Addams received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 in recognition of her extensive peace and social work. Today, *applied sociology* is defined as the use of the discipline of sociology with the specific intent of yielding practical applications for human behaviour and organizations.

Often, the goal of such work is to assist in resolving a social problem. Sociologists are often asked to apply their expertise to such issues as violence, pornography, crime, immigration, and population. In Europe, both academic and governmental research departments are offering increasing financial support for applied studies.

Growing interest in applied sociology has led to such specializations as medical sociology and environmental sociology. The former includes research on how health care professionals and patients deal with disease. For example, medical sociologists have studied the social impact of the AIDS crisis on families, friends, and communities. Environmental sociologists examine the relationship between human societies and the physical environment. One focus of their work is the issue of “environmental justice” (see Chapter 10), which has been raised because researchers and community activists have found that hazardous waste dumps are especially likely to be found in poor and minority neighborhoods (M. Martin 1996).

The growing popularity of applied sociology has led to the rise of the specialty of clinical sociology. Louis Wirth (1931) wrote about clinical sociology more than 70 years ago, but the term itself has become popular only in recent years. While applied sociologists may simply evaluate social issues, *clinical sociology* is dedicated to altering social relationships (as in family therapy) or to restructuring social institutions (as in the reorganization of a medical center).

Applied sociologists generally leave it to others to act on their evaluations. By contrast, clinical sociologists take direct responsibility for implementation and view those with whom they work as their clients. This specialty has become increasingly attractive to graduate students in sociology because it offers an opportunity to apply intellectual learning in a practical way.

Applied and clinical sociology can be contrasted with *basic* (or *pure*) *sociology*, which seeks a more profound knowledge of the fundamental



**What issues facing your local community would you like to address with applied sociological research?**

aspects of social phenomena. This type of research is not necessarily meant to generate specific applications, although such ideas may result once findings are analyzed. When Durkheim studied suicide rates, he was not primarily interested in discovering a way to eliminate suicide. In this sense, his research was an example of basic rather than applied sociology.

## FINDING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The opening vignette, which involved Alberta Premier Ralph Klein confronting homeless men at a shelter in Edmonton while under the influence of alcohol, raises several questions. The premier's behaviour, though he publicly apologized for it at a later date, likely is based in a view that is shared by many. The popular, commonsensical notion is that homeless individuals "just don't try hard enough" to get a job. The perception is that they are lazy; they are parasites to society, and in many cases, an eyesore as well. Yet, a sociologist would approach the issue of homelessness and the behaviour of the premier differently; the sociologist looks beyond the commonsensical view.

A sociologist might look at the changing structure of the labour market which has resulted in increasing numbers of people being laid off and unable to find work. The sociologist would also consider cutbacks to social welfare programs and services such as employment insurance and social assistance, which mean that a valuable source of aid for low-income and poverty-stricken Canadians simply does not exist anymore or is unavailable to them because of increasingly strict criteria for distributing these funds. In addition to this, decreases in government support for social housing mean less affordable housing for people on assistance or struggling to make ends meet.

The report of the Homelessness Task Force in Toronto in 1998 confirmed that spousal assault (one in four women in Toronto who use the hostel system report being victims of spousal assault) and physical and sexual abuse (three out of four young people who are homeless have a history of abuse) drive victims away from their abusers and to the streets (Homelessness Action Task Force 2004). Once on the street they are subject to further victimization. Mental illness and addictions are additional factors that contribute to homelessness, particularly among single adults. Finally, one in seven homeless people, in Toronto in 1998, were aboriginal people. These findings are not unique to Toronto. Particularly interesting about the Edmonton incident is the fact

that the vacancy rate in the city at the time was abnormally low (less than 1 percent); many of the homeless men at the shelter in fact had jobs, but simply could not find a place to live. Sometimes, a reliance on commonsensical understandings of the world can lead to misinformation and misunderstanding.

The sociological imagination encourages us to look beyond surface appearances. You have now been exposed to the sociological perspective and sociological theories. What might each sociological perspective have to say about the incident described at the beginning of the chapter? Do you recall your reaction to the opening vignette? Has your reaction to homeless individuals changed, or has reading the chapter made you more convinced that your initial reaction to the event is the “correct” one?

In this chapter we also learned about the scientific method and its use in sociological studies. Suppose you were commissioned by a government agency to conduct a study on homelessness in your city. How would you do it? Would a participant observation study be appropriate? A survey? Which research method would provide the best overall understanding of this social problem? What might be some of the ethical issues you would have to resolve when studying homeless populations?

## SOCIOLOGY MATTERS

Sociology matters because it offers new insights into what is going on around you, in your own life as well as in the larger society. Consider the purpose of a college education:

- What are your own reasons for going to college? Did your parents influence your decision in any way? Did your friends? Are you interested only in academics, or did you enroll for the social life as well?
- How does your pursuit of a college education impact society as a whole? What are the social effects of your decision to become a student, both now and later in life, after you receive your degree?

Sociology also matters because sociologists follow a systematic research design to reach their conclusions. Consider the importance of careful research:

- Have you ever acted on incomplete information, or even misinformation? What were the results?
- What might be the result if legislators or government policy makers were to base their actions on faulty research?

## GETTING IT TOGETHER!

### What Is Sociology?

- **Sociology** (p. 2) is the systematic study of social behaviour and human groups. The two levels of analysis are **macrosociology** (p. 2), the focus on broad patterns, and **microsociology** (p. 2), which focuses on small group interactions.
- Sociologists use the **sociological imagination** (p. 3), which is an awareness of the relationship between an individual and the wider society. It is based on an ability to view society as an outsider might, rather than from the perspective of an insider

### What Is Sociological Theory?

- A **theory** (p. 7) is a set of statements that seeks to explain problems, actions or behaviour. Effective theories have both explanatory and predictive power.

### How Did Sociology Develop?

- Nineteenth-century thinkers who contributed to the development of sociological theory include Émile Durkheim, who pioneered work on suicide; Max Weber, a German thinker who taught the need for *Verstehen* (p. 10), or insight, in intellectual work; and Karl Marx, a German intellectual who emphasized the importance of class conflict.

### What Are the Major Theoretical Perspectives?

- Today several theoretical perspectives guide sociological research. The **functionalist perspective** (p. 14) holds that society is structured in ways that maintain social stability, so that social change tends to be slow and evolutionary.
- The **conflict perspective** (p. 15), on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of conflict between competing social groups, so that social change tends to be swift and revolutionary.
- The **feminist perspective** (p. 17) stresses gender as the key to understanding social interactions. Feminist sociologists charge that too often, scholars concentrate on male social roles, ignoring male-female differences in behaviour.
- The **interactionist perspective** (p. 17) is concerned primarily with the everyday ways in which individuals shape their society and are shaped by it. Interactionists see social change as an ongoing and very personal process.

## What Is the Scientific Method?

- The **scientific method** (p. 20) is a systematic, organized series of steps that ensures maximum objectivity and consistency in researching a problem. It includes five steps: defining the problem; reviewing the literature; formulating the hypothesis; selecting the **research design** (p. 26) and collecting and analyzing data; and developing the conclusion. The **hypothesis** (p. 22) states a possible relationship between two or more variables, usually one **independent variable** (p. 22) and a **dependent variable** (p. 22) that is thought to be related to it.
- To avoid having to test everyone in a population, sociologists use a **sample** (p. 23) that is representative of the general population. Using a representative sample lends **validity** (p. 24) and **reliability** (p. 24) to the results of scientific research.

## How Do Sociologists Conduct Research?

- Sociologists use four major **research designs** (p. 26) in their work: **surveys** (p. 26) of the population; **participant observation** (p. 27) of behaviours and communities; **experiments** (p. 28) that test hypothetical cause-and-effect relationships; and **secondary analysis** (p. 29), that is, analysis of existing sources.

## What Are the Ethics of Sociological Research?

- Sociologists must follow the **code of ethics** (p. 30) set out in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. Sociologists must respect the human dignity of their subjects, and must respect free and informed consent, vulnerable persons, privacy and confidentiality, justice and inclusiveness. In addition they must balance harms and benefits to subjects, minimizing any harm.

## How Do Sociologists “Do” Sociology?

- **Applied sociology** (p. 31) refers to the practical application of the discipline to problems in human behaviour and organizations. It is a growing field that includes community research, environmental sociology, and **clinical sociology** (p. 31).



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