**Sociology—A Journey—**

**Chapter 1: The Sociological Perspective**

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**Table of Contents**

What Am I Studying? What Is Sociology? .................................................................4

So What Exactly Is Sociology? ......................................................................................4

But Which One Is Correct? .........................................................................................4

So How Did Sociology Come to Be? ............................................................................5

But Why Did This New Discipline Suddenly Appear? What Caused This New Way of Thinking To Emerge? .................................................................5

The Sociological Imagination .......................................................................................6

The Sociological Imagination: An Example—Personal Problem ....................................7

The Sociological Imagination: An Example—Public Issue .............................................8

Something to Ponder 1: .............................................................................................11

The Sociological Perspective .........................................................................................11

Seeing the General in the Particular ..........................................................................12

Seeing the Strange in the Familiar & the Familiar in the Strange .................................12

Example #1—Seeing the Strange in the Familiar .........................................................12

Example #2—Seeing the Strange in the Familiar .........................................................13

Seeing the Familiar in the Strange .............................................................................13
What Am I Studying? What Is Sociology?

According to sixth century BCE philosopher and founder of Taoism Lao-Tzu, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Sociology is, for us, a journey that we must begin by starting with what we think we know, discovering what we don’t know, finding out why our common sense isn’t really sensible, and then, step-by-step, building new knowledge until we begin to understand our own social world, our own place in that world, and how Sociology can help us to see our world with new and different eyes.

However, many people—even individuals like you that have enrolled in an Introduction to Sociology course—have no idea what Sociology is or what Sociologists do.

So What Exactly Is Sociology?

Sociology has been defined in a number of ways ranging from very simple to very complex. In fact, a cursory Google search using the terms “define sociology” produces the following definitions.

1. The study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society.
2. The study of human social behavior, especially the study of the origins, organization, institutions, and development of human society.
3. The science of the fundamental laws of social relations, institutions, etc.
4. The science of society, social institutions, and social relationships.
5. The study of human social life, groups and societies.

But Which One Is Correct?

Well—they’re all correct! Notice that all the definitions have quite a bit of overlap and each of them touches on an element or elements at the core of sociology.

For the purposes of this class, we will use a very simple definition. Sociology is the systematic scientific study of human society. In other words, sociology is the scientific examination of human groups. It is the study of us, ourselves, and the study of why we human beings do the things that we do. Sociology includes the study of culture, socialization, group interaction, social structure, bureaucracies, deviance, stratification and inequality, the institutions of society, and too many other things to list.
So How Did Sociology Come to Be?

Sociology, or the systematic, scientific study of human groups, is one of the youngest academic disciplines. The term was first used by Auguste Comte in 1838. However, it wasn’t until 1895 that Sociology officially became an academic discipline when Emile Durkheim founded the first Department of Sociology at the University of Bordeaux in France. One of the earliest and most influential sociology departments in the United States is housed at the University of Chicago in Illinois.

But Why Did This New Discipline Suddenly Appear? What Caused This New Way of Thinking To Emerge?

Most people attribute the emergence of sociology to three major social changes occurring in the 18th and 19th centuries: Industrialization, Urbanization and Political Change. Industrialization, spurred by the invention of the steam engine, is best understood as the societal shift from agriculture to manufacturing. As a result of this shift, factories and centers of business and industry emerged and the small farming communities scattered throughout the countryside gave way to large urban centers known as cities. This change is referred to as urbanization. Alongside these two major changes, many countries also experienced major political changes such as the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

These changes made people more aware of and interested in their surroundings. People began to be curious about the causes and consequences of these major societal shifts. As a result, many great thinkers of the day—economists, philosophers, attorneys and so on—began to theorize about these changes in an attempt to better understand the world. Consequently, sociology was born!

The goal of early sociologists was simply to understand how society operates. They believed that society, like other things such as motion, and thermodynamics, and gravity, operated according to its own laws. Furthermore, these early sociologists believed that we could systematically study society in an effort to discover these laws. Additionally, they believed that a thorough understanding of society would allow people to act intentionally to change their lives for the better, meaning that early sociologists were both optimists and revolutionaries!

One of the forefathers of sociology, Max Weber, aptly pointed out that sociologists are very fortunate compared to other scientists because sociologists are the only scientists who have first-hand knowledge of their subject matter. In other words, sociologists are part of what they study in a way that biologists and chemists are not. Weber referred to this as Verstehen, which is the German word for understanding.
**The Sociological Imagination**

The Sociological journey means seeing the general in the particular, seeing the strange in the familiar and the familiar in the strange, and seeing personal choice in social context. The Sociological journey means using what is called the Sociological Imagination, an idea proposed and developed by Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), in a famous book entitled *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), where Mills argued that, in order to study properly society, we must analyze the relationship between society and the individual; between the past, present, and future; and must study human behavior in a social, cultural, and historical context. Mills argued that we must never forget that we are studying human behavior and that we must, therefore, never forget the human aspect of Sociology. The Sociological Imagination means comprehending the links between people’s immediate, personal social settings and the remote, impersonal social world that surrounds them and helps to shape them, e.g., when one person is unemployed it is a personal problem but when many people are unemployed it is a social issue and requires analyzing the social structure.

**Photograph 1: Cover of the Book "The Sociological Imagination"**

Once we understand those larger forces and larger structures that affect our lives and the lives of everyone we know and everyone we don’t know then we are on the first step of our sociological journey. And, when we begin to use our critical thinking skills so that we almost always use the sociological perspective, our sociological journey is well on its way. It just requires some background, some history, and some vocabulary to guide us.
The Sociological Imagination: An Example—Personal Problem

Photograph 2: A Stream

You are standing in the middle of a wide, very shallow stream bed. The banks of the streambed are very broad and low so it’s easy to climb in and out of the streambed. You have been hiking and you have everything you need to take care of yourself. You have a backpack filled with water, food, rain gear, a grappling hook and line, etc. You have a powered up mobile phone on your belt. You are all alone, but you are ready for anything. You think!

Suddenly the sky clouds up, torrential rain begins to fall; the temperature drops about thirty degrees in less than fifteen minutes; and the dry streambed is beginning to fill rapidly with water. The banks of the stream have become extremely slippery and the water is flowing very fast. You quickly put on your wading boots and rain gear, but in the process you lose your mobile phone. Because you were in a hurry, you left your backpack open and it is beginning to fill with water and to become too heavy to manage. You lose your balance and fall into the water. Your backpack is swept away and you are trapped in a raging flood, in a huge thunderstorm, alone, with no one around to hear you or help you. There is every possibility that you could die.

Fortunately you escape after being tossed by the wild water into the branches of a tree that is standing by the stream. This was a personal problem. It affected only you and no one else. Only your life was in jeopardy. But you do have a great story to tell.
The Sociological Imagination: An Example—Public Issue

Let’s change the scene. It’s 2005 and you live in New Orleans. There is a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico and it’s heading your way. Ray Nagin, the Mayor of New Orleans, and Kathleen Blanco, the Governor of Louisiana both said, on national TV, several times, that if a major hurricane were to hit New Orleans that there were 100,000 people who were so poor that they had no money or credit cards to allow them to evacuate and no vehicles to evacuate in; therefore, these people were probably going to die. Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. There were no preparations made for evacuation or for any kind of help. The Super Dome and the New Orleans Convention Center were opened as “shelters of last resort” by the government of New Orleans, but there was no food, no water—either bottled or running—no cots, no blankets, no extra toilet paper, no Red Cross, no first responders, no guides, no help, for nearly a week. Eventually FEMA came in and began search, rescue, and evacuation work.

Photograph 5: Hurricane Hunter Plane: Hurricane Katrina 2010
Many people across the United States and indeed the world began to question how a county as rich and powerful as the US could allow such devastation and loss of life as occurred in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. As the nightmare in New Orleans continued it became clear that the government—federal, state, county, city—was not fulfilling its obligations to its citizens.

People called into question the structure of a society where the poor and minorities were most often those who suffered in times of national crisis and there was a huge amount of analysis about poverty and issues of race. People began to understand that the structure of American society was based on the inequality among people based on various aspects of their *master status*—race or ethnicity, sex, gender or sexual orientation, age, religion, ability or disability, and *SES*—an abbreviation of socioeconomic status, which is the separate and combined effects of income, education, and occupation.

Within a few weeks, most of the people who survived the flooding had been relocated. This “book” was written in Houston, TX and many of the evacuees from the devastation and death caused by the flood and by the government entities that didn’t do their jobs to keep the residents of New Orleans safe came here as refugees in their own country. The people who came to Houston from New Orleans were welcomed with open arms by thousands of volunteers who gave their time and goods to help those whose lives had been destroyed. However, after a few weeks, FEMA began to move these shattered men, women, and children into trailers, the children were registered in the local Houston Independent School District schools, and young and old tried to find gainful employments while others registered for classes at local community colleges such as Houston Community College. Immediately, there was conflict between Houstonians and “them” largely due to clashes between high school students that were fueled by rumors.

Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, in an article published in the Winter, 1946-1947 journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* discussed the power of rumors.
story, we are calling attention to the motivational factor in rumor. Any human need may provide the motive power to rumor. Sex interest accounts for much of gossip and most of scandal; anxiety is the power behind the macabre and threatening tales we so often hear; hope and desire underlie pipedream rumors; hate sustains accusatory tales and slander.

It is important to note here the complex purpose that rumor serves. The aggressive rumor, for example, by permitting one to slap at the thing one hates, relieves a primary emotional urge. But at the same time—in the same breath—it serves to justify one in feeling as he does about the situation, and to explain to himself and to others why he feels that way. Thus rumor rationalizes while it relieves.

But to justify our emotional urges and render them reasonable is not the only kind of rationalization. Quite apart from the pressure of particular emotions, we continually seek to extract meaning from our environment. There is, so to speak, intellectual pressure along with the emotional. To find a plausible reason for a confused situation is itself a motive; and this pursuit of a "good closure" (even without the personal factor) helps account for the vitality of many rumors. We want to know the why, how, and wherefore of the world that surrounds us. Our minds protest against chaos. From childhood we are asking why, why? This "effort after meaning" is broader than our impulsive tendency to rationalize and justify our immediate emotional state. Curiosity rumors result. A stranger whose business is unknown to the small town where he takes up residence will breed many legends designed to explain to curious minds why he has come to town. An odd-looking excavation in a city inspires fanciful explanations of its purpose. The atomic bomb, but slightly understood by the public, engenders much effort after meaning. (Allport, An Analysis of Rumor 1946-1947)

That which is different and has an immediate impact on our psyches, is likely find itself rationalized into a rumor. This is how urban legends and urban rumors get started and it is generally unhealthy for some part of the population as it was for many people from New Orleans who settled in Houston.

2011, CNN aired a piece titled “Katrina evacuees shift Houston’s identity” by Thom Patterson, CNN, August 12, 2011 12:06 p.m. EDT. 6 Click here for a short video about this issue. 7
Those who didn’t or couldn’t relocate were still trapped inside piles of debris and mud and feet of mud inside houses. Thousands died. Thousands more lost their homes and everything that they had. There is another story to be told, but it is a story of horror and loss. And it is a story that illustrates the connection between the lived experiences of individuals and their society. New Orleans is whiter than it was before Katrina, richer than it was before Katrina, and more adamantly divided along racial and class lines than it was before Katrina as this 2007 graphic from the New Orleans Times-Picayune indicates.

**Graphic 2: Socioeconomic Changes Before and After Katrina**

To further understand the power of the sociological imagination, check out Sam Richards’ TED talk on empathy.

**Something to Ponder 1:**

1. Do you think that most white people in New Orleans are happy that the poor and the black left in large numbers after Katrina?
2. Why did you answer the way you did?
3. Look up some information on the Internet about what has happened in New Orleans since Katrina.
4. Have the demographics returned to where they were before Katrina?

**The Sociological Perspective**

To ignite the sociological imagination, we must learn to look at the world using the sociological perspective.

The sociological perspective requires us to strive to do 3 things:

1. See the general in the particular.
2. See the strange in the familiar.
3. See personal choice in social context.

By viewing the world through this lens—the sociological perspective—we are able to see and better understand the relationship between individuals and society.
**Seeing the General in the Particular**

Seeing the general in the particular means being able to study one person or one small group of people—the particular—and see the ways that they represent the broader social world and the groups that they belong to—the general.

For example, if we were to walk into a classroom full of college students, we would like observe that most of them are wearing blue jeans. We might think to ourselves: “Hmm... these people must really like blue jeans.”

![Photograph 7: Students Wearing Jeans](Thomas 2010)

But if we are able to see the general in the particular—in other words, if we are using the sociological perspective—we can figure out that the fact that these students are wearing blue jeans is not just about them and their tastes and preferences and choices (the particular), it is about the society and groups (e.g. young people, college students, American society, etc.) to which they belong (the general).

Similarly, if we know one of the students in the classroom—a young, black female—is poor, we can recognize that her lack of resources is not just a reflection of her situation and her choices and behavior but is largely a result of her membership in various minority groups (young, female, and black).

**Seeing the Strange in the Familiar & the Familiar in the Strange**

**Example #1—Seeing the Strange in the Familiar:**

Ghosts, vampires, princesses, dragons, monsters, zombies, and a variety of other bizarre and “mythical” creatures suddenly appear on the streets of your neighborhood around about sundown. These creatures, sometimes singly and sometimes in groups, knock on doors and ring doorbells and beg for sweets often uttering a strange, magical phrase that compels people to do their bidding. People, apparently fearing for their lives, throw sweets into the bags carried by the creatures. Within a few hours the horror has ended for another year and people once again feel safe inside their homes and on their streets. What has been described? Go to the end of this chapter (page 40) to find out! 😊
Example #2—Seeing the Strange in the Familiar:

A man stands before an ancient instrument of torture on the birthday of the god Mithras. The man, along with a very large group of other people, takes part in a cannibalistic feast where the body of the god is eaten and the blood is drunk. The people sing and offer prayers to their god. What has been described? Go to page 40 to find out! 😊

Both of these examples are important illustrations of the approach sociologists must take to understand the social world: they must be able to see the strange in the familiar!

Let’s think for a moment about what these words mean: seeing the strange in the familiar. How can we do that? How can we look at things differently in order to break them down, study them, and try to understand them? We have to stop taking things for granted! That is the key to seeing the strange in the familiar and it is part of the work of the Sociologist: asking questions that other people might not ask about things that most people probably don't even think about or notice.

Seeing the Familiar in the Strange

Example #3—Seeing the Familiar in the Strange:

You are in a large city. There are many men walking down the streets. They are most often in couples. The men are all wearing long flowing clothes and the couples are holding hands as they walk along talking to one another. No one seems to find this unusual except you. What has been described? Go to page 39 to find out! 😊

Example #4—Seeing the Familiar in the Strange:

Click on the link and read the article, “Body Ritual among the Nacirema.” What is it really about? Why is this an example of seeing the familiar in the strange? You don’t have to google this, THINK! The world won’t end if you’re wrong. Think like a sociologist and try to figure this out. (For 2 Extra Credit points, create a short—95 words or more, with a word count—document about what you think “Body Ritual among the Nacirema” is about.)

Something to Ponder 2:

(Can you answer these questions? If not, reread the course material)

1. Have you heard that Halloween candy is unsafe to eat because there are many extremely deviant people who poison the candy?
   a. Do you believe this?
   b. Explain your answer.
2. Did your parents make sure that you had a “safe” Halloween?
   a. What if this wasn’t true?
   b. How would you study this to find out?
3. If you are from a culture that doesn’t celebrate Halloween the way we do, are there similar celebrations such as Dia de los Muertos in Mexico?
4. Wherever you are from, did your parents tell you scary stories that they believed to be true?
   a. Do you still believe those stories?
5. How would you study this to find out if those stories are true or are rumors or urban myths?
6. What urban myths do you know?
7. Read “The Myth of Poisoned Halloween Candy” below, and watch the video.
   a. Did this change your mind?
      i. If so, why?
      ii. If not, why not?

The Myth of Poisoned Halloween Candy

Dr. Joel Best, Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware says,

I have been studying this for some time. If you go to my webpage (http://joelbest.net/) you can find your way to a summary document (“Halloween Sadism: The Evidence”). I will be updating that document in a week or so.

Bottom line: having reviewed press coverage back to 1958, I have not found any evidence that any child has been killed or seriously injured by a contaminated treat picked up in the course of trick or treating. (I don't count taking out a $20,000 life insurance policy on your own son and then poisoning him. When parents worry, they presumably aren't worrying that they're going to kill their own children. I also don't count four other deaths, where the initial attribution to Halloween sadism was retracted.) This story is very old. I have spoken to people who were trick or treating in the late 1940s who say they were warned to watch out for people who would heat pennies on a skillet, and then pour red-hot pennies in to the outstretched hands of trick-or-treaters. Ronald O'Bryan (a.k.a., The Candyman http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Man-Who-Killed-Halloween-still-haunts-holiday-1971811.php) did not start the story. Rather, he apparently figured that, since gazillions of kids were poisoned each Halloween, no one would suspect him of poisoning his own kid. (Folklorists, by the way, called this sort of performing a contemporary legend ostension.) [Contemporary legend ostension can also be thought of as folklore or urban legends]. 10 (Best, A Conversation with Dr. Joel Best 2011)

In this 5 minute video, Dr. Best explains the myth of poisoned Halloween candy. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bav01pAZrNw&feature=channel_video_title>. Did you know he is the expert on this myth<http://www.chicagotribune.com/health/la-heb-halloween-candy-poison-myth-20111029_0,3528711.story> in the US?
Seeing Personal Choice in Social Context

Seeing personal choice in social context is the final component of the sociological perspective. The ability to see personal choice in social context means being able to recognize that people don’t just decide to do things. Rather, all of our personal choices (aka agency) are constrained by the social context (aka structure) in which we live our lives.

For example, in all of the preceding examples—college students wearing jeans, the people described in the previous topics, seeing the strange in the familiar and the familiar in the strange—we have a tendency to assume that the people in question just decided to do all the things that they did. However, that is simply not the case. Instead, college students in the US typically wear jeans because jeans are one of the many acceptable and available options provided by their social context. Similarly, Catholics don’t typically just hop out of bed at random one day and exclaim, “I’d like to eat some wafers and drink some wine to honor Jesus!” Rather, most Catholics grew up in an environment where they were socialized into the behavior and they choose to take Communion because it is part of the social fabric of their lives. Similarly, the Middle-Eastern men hold hands because they have grown up in a society where that is the norm for men who are friends and relatives. We call this process of learning the norms of our society, socialization.

One of the earliest and most famous sociological studies conducted illustrates this component of the sociological perspective very well. In 1897, Émile Durkheim published a study on suicide rates in Europe. Among other things, Durkheim found that males committed suicide more often than females, unmarried people committed suicide more often than married people, and wealthy people committed suicide more often than poor people. Can you figure out what might explain all three of these trends?

Durkheim asserted that the explanatory factor was social integration. Specifically, Durkheim argued that the more socially integrated a person was—in other words, the more social ties and connections a person has—the less likely they are to commit suicide. Conversely, those with low social integration are at higher risk of suicide. If you think about the basic lifestyles and activities and circumstances of men, unmarried people, and wealthy people, Durkheim’s explanation seems to make sense: men have fewer social ties than women, unmarried people have fewer social ties than married people, and wealthy people have fewer social ties than poor people (because wealthy people are independent).

But what does this have to do with seeing personal choice in social context? Well... Durkheim’s study supports the idea that even our most deeply personal choices (like the choice to commit suicide) are impacted by our social context (in this case social integration).

Notably, Durkheim’s findings—that suicide rates increase as social integration decreases—are supported by modern data.

For instance, look at this map of suicide rates produced by the Centers for Disease Control. The areas with the highest suicide rates, shown on this map in dark brown, are also the areas with the lowest population density. It seems reasonable to assume that individuals who live in sparsely populated areas have fewer social ties—and thus lower social integration and higher suicide risk—than individuals who live in densely populated areas. Thus, modern data on the geographical dispersion of suicide rates supports Durkheim’s theory over 100 years later. [Interested in learning more about Durkheim’s suicide study? Check out this Student-Created YouTube Video]
In conclusion, developing the ability to see the general in the particular, the strange in the familiar (and the familiar in the strange), and personal choice in social context is the first step to activating your sociological imagination so that you can clearly see and examine the connections between people (personal problems) and their social world (public issues). Congratulations! You are on your way to thinking like a sociologist.

*Graphic 3: Suicide Rates in the US (ca 2012)*
Sociological Paradigms/ Perspectives

A paradigm/perspective, in science, is a framework upon which we build our theories and then test our theories. All sciences have paradigms/perspectives which are also ways of describing the natural or social world. For instance, paleontologists are people who study long-extinct plants and animals. They have two major paradigms/perspectives about the extinction of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago: 1) dinosaurs went extinct because a massive extra-terrestrial body hit the earth and created tsunamis, firestorms, and windstorms that devastated the planet and killed off most living species; 2) almost all dinosaurs went extinct because of the same collision, but some survived. As birds!

Let’s look at this:

And this:

They look very similar, don’t they? Are you surprised?

There are other more telling similarities: size, bone density and porosity, and other more important things, latent DNA that can be “switched on” in modern birds such as long tails and teeth, but the point is, one paradigm/perspective sees extinction and evolution this way, just as sociologists have different ways of looking at the human world.

A paradigm/perspective, in sociology, is a description of the world of human behavior; it is a description of society. A paradigm/perspective is a description of the interactions of human beings within any society. Paradigms/Perspectives are broad viewpoints that permit social scientists to have a wide range of tools to describe society, and then to build hypotheses and
Theories. Paradigms/Perspectives don’t do anything but DESCRIBE! They analyze based on their descriptions. That is all they do. They are scientific tools. Paradigms/Perspectives cannot occur or happen! Societies are not Conflictualist, Structural-Functionalist, or Symbolic Interactionist. People and social events are not based on paradigms/perspectives: A paradigm/perspective is a viewpoint, a guiding principal, a belief system, but sociologists use paradigms/perspectives to describe what humans do. Paradigms/Perspectives cannot be proven or disproven, but they lead to the development of testable theories.

The Social Conflict Paradigm/Perspective

In contrast to the balanced society Structural-Functionalist see, the Conflict paradigm/perspective describes the inequalities that exist in all societies around the globe and points out how unbalanced most societies are. Every society is plagued by inequality based on social differences among the dominant group and all of the other groups in society. Like Structural-Functionalist, Conflict theory is a macro-level paradigm/perspective/perspective.
When we are analyzing any element of society from this perspective, we need to look at the structures of wealth, power, and status and the ways in which those structures maintain the social, economic, political, and coercive power of one group at the expense of all other groups.

Conflict is particularly interested in the inequalities that exist based on all of the various aspects of master status—race or ethnicity, sex or gender, age, religion, ability or disability, and socioeconomic status (comprised of the combined effects of income, education, and occupation). As a result, the Conflict paradigm/perspective does a very good job of explaining racism, sexism, ageism, socioeconomic inequality (wealth and poverty), etc.

**Helpful Hint**

The name of the paradigm/perspective—social conflict—holds many clues to the essential elements of the paradigm/perspective. First, the word social indicates that the paradigm/perspective is targeting groups. Second, the term conflict is a reminder that societies are characterized not by solidarity and stability (as Structural-Functionalists claim), but by conflict resulting from inequality among dominant and disadvantaged groups. Thus, in sum, conflict theorists are interested in how inequality among groups in society creates conflict that ultimately drives social change.

**Something to Ponder 3:**

*(Can you answer these questions? If not, reread the course material)*

**Google each of these important theorists:**

1. What did you find out?
   a. Write a very brief summary about these people.
   b. How are they the same?
   c. How are they different?
   d. Do you agree or disagree with them?

2. Create your own example of the Social Conflict paradigm/perspective.

**Important Theorists—Social Conflict Paradigm/ Perspective**

- **Karl Marx** [Interested in learning more? Check out this webpage about other Marxist thinkers.]
- Pierre Bourdieu
- Friedrich Engels
- Daniel Bell
- C. Wright Mills
- Ralf Dahrendorf
- Pitirim Sorokin
- W.E.B. DuBois
- Jane Addams
- Daniel Bell
- Ralf Dahrendorf
- W.E.B. DuBois
The Structural-Functionalist Paradigm/Perspective

The Structural-Functionalist paradigm/perspective describes society as stable and describes all of the various mechanisms that maintain social stability. Structural-Functionalism argues that the social structure is responsible for all stability and instability, and that that the social structure is continuously attempting to maintain social equilibrium (balance) among all of the components of society. Structural-Functionalism argues that a stable society is the best possible society and any element that helps to maintain that stability must add to the adaptability (functionality) of society. This is a macro-level paradigm/perspective that describes large-scale processes and large-scale social systems; it is uninterested in individual behavior.

The Structural-Functionalist paradigm/perspective does a very good job of explaining the ways in which the institutions of society (the family, education, religion, law/politics/government, the economy, medicine, media) work together to create social solidarity (a social contract in which society as a whole agrees upon the rules of social behavior and agrees, more or less, to abide by those rules) and to maintain balance in society. Read this blog about [Jury Duty in Waterbury, CT, by Gary Ploski](http://example.com). 15

Structural-Functionalism, or the Structural-Functionalist paradigm/perspective, describes the elements in society that create social stability **FOR THE GREATEST NUMBER OF PEOPLE.** This paradigm/perspective, like the Conflict paradigm/perspective, is very interested in the structure of society and how it impacts people's lives. However, Structural-Functionalism sees the social structure as creating equilibrium or balance. It also describes the various elements of society that maintain that balance. One of its basic premises is that society is structured to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Unfortunately, this perspective ignores minorities and is unable to explain inequality except to say that it must have a social function—it must make society more adaptable—simply because inequality has always existed. Structural-Functionalism describes, analyzes, and is interested in any social element that maintains the status quo—keeps things as they are—and maintains social balance between and among all of the institutions of society (the family, education, religion, law/politics/government, the economy, medicine, and media).

Take a look at this [video](http://example.com). It's a short time lapse video of an Alexander Calder mobile. You might think it's boring or silly to watch, but it's an almost perfect way to visualize society from the Structural-Functionalist perspective. It's all about balance and very gradual, very slow change.
(This video was taken in the National Gallery in Washington, DC and guess what? We, the American people, own everything there! But we’ll get to that idea later and in another chapter.) The modern mobile was created by Calder who started his college career and his work career as a structural engineer. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has a Calder stabile in the shape of a crab in its collection. Sometimes it’s on the sidewalk near the main entrance as it is in this photograph. The mobile on the right side of the page is an original work by Alexander Calder; its home is the Menil Collection in Houston.

Photograph 11: Calder Crab Stabile (HMFA)

Photograph 12: A Calder Mobile (Menil Collection-Houston)

Helpful Hint

The name of the paradigm/perspective—Structural-Functionalism—holds many clues to the essential elements of the paradigm/perspective. First, the word structural is a reference to the Structural-Functionalist term social structure, which refers to the basic building blocks (or parts) of society such as government, religion, education, family and so on. Second, the word function is a reminder that Structural-Functionalists believe all things in society serve a function (or have a purpose); otherwise, according to Structural-Functionalists, they wouldn't exist. Thus, in sum, Structural-Functionalists are interested in how social structures function, focusing primarily on how these structures promote solidarity and stability as well as the social mechanisms that maintain balance. Look at the Calder mobile again. Each part moves in order to balance every other part, so when one part dips another rises. It’s like a perpetual dance. Durkheim said that each institution of society tries to maintain equilibrium by correcting—when one part dips or rises another part reacts and balances the whole once more. (NOTE: the institutions of society are social relationships and interactions that are fundamental to the proper working of any human group, large or small. The institutions of society are: the family, education, religion, law/politics and government, and the economy. We will visit this idea again in a later chapter.)
Something to Ponder 4:

(Can you answer these questions? If not, reread the course material)

1. What did you find out?
   a. Write a very brief summary about these people.
   b. How are they the same?
   c. How are they different?
   d. Do you agree or disagree with them?

2. Create your own example of the Structural-Functionalist paradigm/perspective.

Important Theorists—Structural-Functionalist Paradigm/Perspective

Talcott Parsons  Clifford Geertz
Emile Durkheim  Robert K. Merton
Max Weber  Kingsley Davis
Georg Simmel  Wilbert Moore

The Symbolic Interactionist Paradigm/Perspective

Symbolic Interactionism describes society as small groups of individuals interacting based on the various ways that people interpret their various cultural symbols such as spoken, written, and non-verbal language. Our behavior with and among other people (our interaction) is the result of our shared understanding of cultural symbols. This is a micro-level paradigm/perspective that describes small-scale processes and small-scale social systems; it is interested in individual behavior.

The most important aspect of the Symbolic Interactionist paradigm/perspective is not so much that it is interested in small groups—although that is of great importance—as that it is interested in the interpretation of cultural symbols. For Symbolic Interactionism, everything in society is based on how we interpret our cultural symbols—media images, language, stereotypes, perceptions, and belief systems.

The Social Creation of Reality

For example, in the US, we have a long history of creating a social mythology that leads many of us to believe that the poor, the minorities, women, non-white, non-Christian people are somehow not as American as White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), and are somehow not as deserving of social approval as White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). This social mythology is reinforced by the media’s portrayal of non-white, non-middle class, non-Christian, etc. Americans as being disease-ridden, criminally-inclined, dangerous, and altogether unacceptable or barely acceptable in American society. This social mythology creates negative symbols that impact the actual, daily lives of the not-well-off, not Christian, not white, not female, etc. citizens and residents in our country. These negative symbols engender fear, hatred, neglect, and deliberate ignorance concerning the lives of those people in our country who are, in some socially defined way, out of the “mainstream” of American society.
Symbolic Interactionism does a very good job of explaining how various forms of language (including the images and the messages in the media) shape our interactions with one another and reinforce stereotypes. [Interested in learning more? Click on the link for an article on How Language Shapes Reality.]

Because of the primacy of individuals and interpretation, Symbolic Interactionists believe that we, as individuals, socially construct society and that we are the architects of our own reality.

The painting on the left, above, by Rene Magritte, is titled “Blank Cheque.” The painting on the right is also by Magritte and is titled “The Treachery of Images,” the writing at the bottom is French, and in English it reads “This is not a pipe.” What do you suppose he meant? Magritte was part of an art movement known as surrealism. This might make you wonder what kind of reality he was constructing. What did he see that he was trying to explain to us through his art? For more information about Magritte and his work, click here for the Museum of Modern Art, NY (MOMA). If you want to see more there are a couple of Magritte paintings in Houston, at the Menil Collection. The Magritte collection from MOMA was in Houston from mid-February through June 1, 2014. Whoops! Sorry you missed it, but you might like the small permanent Magritte exhibit at the Menil Collection.

The phrase “social construction of reality” was made famous by a 1966 book written by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The central idea is that as people interact with one another, the roles that they play and the meanings associated with their actions become institutionalized and embedded into society. In other words, meaning doesn’t just exist “out there” and scripts for behavior are not “natural” or “objective.” Rather meaning is created by people as they interact through symbolic exchange and scripts are thus created through this interaction, making them seem natural despite their socially constructed nature. (Andersen 2000)
Helpful Hint

The name of the paradigm/perspective—symbolic interactionism—holds many clues to the essential elements of the paradigm/perspective. First, the word symbolic is a reference to the fact that meaning is socially constructed because symbols have no inherent meaning—only the meaning that we attach to them. Second, the word interaction highlights the centrality of the individual in this paradigm/perspective and points out that the meaning construction occurs only as people exchange symbols with other, referred to as interaction. Thus, in sum, symbolic interactionists are interested in how individuals construct meaning—and therefore construct both society and reality—through the exchange of symbols. Think of it like this; when you were a child you believed your toys were alive and you talked to them and, mostly, took care of them and played with them. You fantasized about the world you and your toys lived in and in doing so, you created your own reality!

Something to Ponder 5:

(Can you answer these questions? If not, reread the course material)

1. What did you find out?
   a. Write a very brief summary about these people.
   b. How are they the same?
   c. How are they different?
   d. Do you agree or disagree with them?

2. Create your own example of the Symbolic Interactionist paradigm/perspective.

Important Theorists—Symbolic Interactionist Paradigm/Perspective

Erving Goffman
George Herbert Mead
Herbert Blumer

W.I. Thomas
Charles Horton Cooley
Howard Becker

The Social Construction of Reality

Now what on earth does that mean? Reality is reality! Everyone knows what is real and what isn’t. That’s what common sense tells us, but common sense can be very, very wrong. A hundred years ago in the United States common sense told us that black people and white people shouldn’t get married because it’s just wrong to mix the races. Up until 1954, it was common sense that white people should have their own schools and that blacks, Latinos, and Asians should have separate schools. It’s common sense that poor people are more likely to be criminals than the non-poor. All of these common sense ideas are wrong. There was a reality created in this country beginning with the importation of African slaves in 1619.

Slavery in America began when the first African slaves were brought to the North American colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, to aid in the production of such lucrative crops as tobacco. Slavery
was practiced throughout the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, and African-American slaves helped build the economic foundations of the new nation. (History Channel Unknown)

In the early 17th century, European settlers in North America turned to African slaves as a cheaper, more plentiful labor source than indentured servants (who were mostly poorer Europeans). After 1619, when a Dutch ship brought 20 Africans ashore at the British colony of *Jamestown, Virginia*, slavery spread throughout the American colonies. Though it is impossible to give accurate figures, some historians have estimated that 6 to 7 million slaves were imported to the New World during the 18th century alone, depriving the African continent of some of its healthiest and ablest men and women. (History Channel Unknown)

Those who caused people from Africa to be kidnapped from their homelands and taken across the oceans to new and strange land believed that they were doing the right thing.

Sometimes we construct our reality so that it takes away the burden of doing immoral things, such as trading in slaves. Sometimes we construct our reality because it is a cultural practice that has been passed on through generations. Why do we say “Bless you,” when someone sneezes? Why are gentlemen to walk on the left side of women? These are social constructs—practices among humans created (constructed) in order to address certain beliefs. In Middle Eastern countries why is it rude to eat food with your left hand? In China, why is the color red so important? There are innumerable human practices around the world that are specific to one people and one culture or specific to one country with multiple cultures.

**Something to Ponder 6:**

*(Can you answer these questions? If not, reread the course material)*

1. Why do we say “Bless you,” when someone sneezes?
2. Why are gentlemen to walk on the left side of women?
3. In Middle Eastern countries why is it rude to eat food with your left hand?
4. In China, why is the color red so important?
5. What are three things about your culture—the US or another country— that are social constructions?

**The Social Construction of Reality: Thomas's Theorem**

William I. Thomas (1863-1947)—from the Chicago School of Sociology—was a professor at the University of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s and developed what has come to be called Thomas's Theorem which states: “things perceived to be real will be real in their consequences.” (Coser, Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context 1977) Robert K. Merton, wrote this about Thomas’s Theorem:

*if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. . . . Once meaning has been assigned, their consequent behavior is shaped by [that] meaning. If people believe in witches such beliefs have tangible consequences—they may, for example, kill those persons assumed to be witches. This then is the power the human mind has in*
transmuting raw sense data into a categorical apparatus that could make murderers of us all. Once a Vietnamese becomes a “gook,” or a Black a “nigger,” or a Jew a “kike,” that human being has been transmuted through the peculiar alchemy of social definition into something wholly “other” who is now a target of prejudice and discrimination, of violence and aggression, and even murder. (Coser, Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context. Lewis A. Coser. Harcourt. Fort Worth. 1977. p. 521. 1977)

In other words, we act on what we think/believe is real regardless of its actual reality. Our beliefs, our perceptions guide our behavior. We treat people based on what we perceive to be their basic characteristics often based solely on our perception. (Thompson 1996) (Schaeffer1998) (Andersen 2000)

Stereotypes and discriminatory behavior are almost always based on such perceptions. Our own position in society is judged just as we judge that of others and based on the same generally superficial qualities. What are the first things you notice when you meet someone for the first time? Do the things you notice influence your analysis of that person? (Thompson 1996) (Schaefer 1998) (Andersen 2000)

This picture is Norman Rockwell’s painting of Ruby Bridges who is being escorted to school by FBI agents because she is a black child integrating an all-white school for the first time. There were (and still are) those in our society who would have killed Ruby simply because of the color of her skin. On the wall behind Ruby is written the word “Nigger.” Thomas’ Theorem tells us that when we call people names, we have turned them into objects, and objectifying people permits us to do to them anything we want, including murdering them. The photo of this poster is courtesy of: [http://store.nrm.org/browse.cfm/4,199.html](http://store.nrm.org/browse.cfm/4,199.html). This illustration first appeared in Look magazine in 1964 and is titled “The Problem We All Live With.” 22 23

According to SocioSite [an imprint of the Social Science Information System University of Amsterdam]

the determination of action no longer comes exclusively from outside sources but is located within the organism itself.
Preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the definition of the situation. And actually not only concrete acts are dependent on the definition of the situation, but gradually a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual himself follow from a series of such definitions.

There is therefore always a rivalry between the spontaneous definitions of the situation made by the member of an organized society and the definitions which his society has provided for him. The individual tends to a hedonistic selection of activity, pleasure first; and society to a utilitarian selection, safety first. Society wishes its member to be laborious, dependable, regular, sober, orderly, self-sacrificing; while the individual wishes less of this and more of new experience. And organized society seeks also to regulate the conflict and competition inevitable between its members in the pursuit of their wishes. The desire to have wealth, for example, or any other socially sanctioned wish, may not be accomplished at the expense of another member of the society,—by murder, theft, lying, swindling, blackmail, etc. 24

According to DEFINING THE SITUATION 25 [from the Sociology Index of Trinity University, London, UK]

Interpersonally, defining the situation is the matter of whose perspective frames the way in which social phenomena are collectively perceived (or ignored) and understood (both cognitively and emotionally). In terms of gestalt, involved in framing is determining which social elements (which may be material objects, individuals, values, or beliefs) are to be conceptualized as being related and how: e.g., kin vs. non-kin, ally vs. foe, good vs. evil, just vs. unjust, sacred vs. profane, and mine/ours vs. others. Framing involves both differentiating figure from ground (which, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is how meaning is assigned) and thesis from antithesis.

... how things are "framed" (defined by Erving Goffman in Frame Analysis as "schemata of interpretation" that enables individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large" [1974:21]) determines how they are to be interpreted. Once a situation is defined and perceived as real, as W. I. Thomas observed, it becomes real in its consequences: it becomes a "self-fulfilling prophecy."

These issues of framing and defining situations brings up the matters of social power and influence. Shared "realities" exist because some groups have more power than others, meaning that they are able to impose their belief systems and behavioral scripts over the less influential.
conformity
obedience to authority.
living up to normative expectations
how rules "work"
Harold Garfinkel's "breeching" experiments
why manners matter
motive talk
Joseph Hopper's "The Rhetoric of Motives in Divorce"
lessons learned from excuse making
Shlomo Hareli's "Excuses, emotions and in between"
compliance
reference groups
persuasion, including the use of ideology and propaganda
mass media and advertising 26

How We Use Language and What It Means

Think about the ways you use language to describe yourself and others. Think about the way various segments of our society use language. For example, the following excerpt from an article about hip hop and rap music discusses "authenticity" in the lyrics versus what some people might call "political correctness." Does the use of the "B" word damage women? There are some studies that argue that it does. (See "Does Language Really Matter?")

It is not difficult to argue that language is a product of and shapes our reality. Language is spoken and written, but the clothes we wear, how we adorn our bodies (jewelry, tattoos, scaring, branding, piercings, etc.), whether and how we use things like make-up to change our appearance, the way we dance, the kind of music we listen to, the food we eat, how women, children, and the aged are treated, how prisoners are treated, how we dispose of our dead, etc. Language is not limited to spoken or written words, it is infinitely richer and more nuanced than that.

Congress Examines Hip-Hop Language
Lawmakers, music industry executives and rappers disagreed Tuesday over who was to blame for sexist and degrading language in hip-hop music but united in opposing government censorship as a solution.

"If by some stroke of the pen hip-hop was silenced, the issues would still be present in our communities," rapper and record producer David Banner, whose real name is Levell Crump, said in prepared statements to a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee hearing. "Drugs, violence and the criminal element were around long before hip-hop existed."

At the hearing, music videos showing scantily clad women were played; music executives in dark suits testified on the uses of the "B," "H" and "N" words, and black civil rights leaders talked of corporate exploitation. 27

This article discusses a study that argues that pre-existing sexist attitudes are made worse when students are exposed to sexist language in rap music. Do you agree with this study? Why or why not? Do you use language that harms others? If so, why do you use that language? (Answer these questions for a few extra credit points.) There's an old saying “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” However, we know, today, that words do hurt; so much so, that verbal abuse is seen as being every bit as damaging as physical abuse.

Study: Rap Music Linked to Sexism February 21, 2008

Rap music brings out sexism in college students, but it doesn't necessarily cause the students to be sexist.

That's the conclusion of a North Carolina State University study that examined rap music's effects on sexist attitudes among college students. Many critics claim that rap music causes sexist beliefs, but the study's authors suggest the connection they found between rap and sexism is unlikely to be a direct cause-and-effect.

"It's like hearing the word 'chocolate' and suddenly having a craving for a candy bar," says Dr. Michael Cobb, assistant professor of political science, who conducted the study along with Dr. Bill Boettcher, associate professor of political science.
Cobb and Boettcher's findings—titled “Ambivalent Sexism and Misogynistic Rap Music: Does Exposure to Eminem Increase Sexism?”—were recently published in the Journal of Applied Social Psychology.

The study found that college students who were asked to listen to rap music had significantly higher levels of reported sexism. In the study, males who listened to any rap music were more sexist than those in the control group even though sometimes the rap lyrics did not include sexist language. Females in the study also reported higher levels of sexism when rap music was not sexist in its language, but their endorsement of sexist beliefs was the lowest after listening to rap with overtly sexist language.

"Sexism is imbedded in the culture we live in, and hearing rap music can spontaneously activate pre-existing awareness of sexist beliefs," Cobb says. "We feel it's unlikely that hearing lyrics in a song creates attitudes that did not previously exist. Instead, rap music, fairly or unfairly, has become associated with misogyny, and even minimal exposure to it can automatically activate these mental associations and increase their application, at least temporarily."

To measure the association between rap and sexism, students were recruited to take part in a study and were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. In the control group, students' levels of sexism were measured, but they did not listen to any music. A second condition required students to listen to non-sexist rap music, while a third required them to listen to a rap song with explicitly sexist language. In these two conditions, students' levels of sexism were measured after listening to the music, but they were unaware of the true purpose of the study.

Participants in the group assigned to listen to rap with sexist lyrics heard the song Kill You by Eminem, which describes hostility and violence toward women. The group listening to rap with non-sexist lyrics heard Sabotage by the Beastie Boys, a song that has a similar rhythm to Kill You, but is devoid of overt sexist lyrics.

As expected, males were more sexist across all three conditions. Surprisingly, however, Cobb and Boettcher found that sexist attitudes among respondents also increased after exposure to rap that contained no sexist lyrics.

"Rap music may be associated with sexist attitudes and beliefs, regardless of the actual lyrical content," Cobb says. "So non-sexist rap can now have sexist implications. This gets back to our hypothesis that we don't think rap music causes
sexism, because how can rap that contains non-sexist lyrics cause someone to become sexist?"

According to Cobb, "the key to understanding why women rejected sexism only after listening to Eminem is motivated self-awareness. In the absence of explicitly sexist language, the negative associations with rap music are still being primed. In this case, however, the receiver is unaware that this process is taking place and therefore makes no attempt to inhibit their reactions. When women listened to Eminem, however, the blatant misogyny is startling to them and it triggers a more careful interpretation and rejection of the premises in the song. Males, who were not the targets of Eminem's ire in the song, are not as motivated to recognize the mechanisms at work."

"Priming latent sexism is not the same thing as causing it," Cobb says. "At worst, we could conclude that rap music might exacerbate pre-existing tendencies, but so too can other genres of music and varied forms of entertainment. There is not much evidence in our study to support an argument in favor of censorship."

Source: North Carolina State University

Does Language Really Matter 2?

In the early 1990s, in the Central African Republic of Rwanda, one ethnic group, the Hutu, began a campaign to destroy a rival ethnic group, the Tutsi. A Hutu-owned broadcasting company created the Hutu Ten Commandments which stated that the Tutsi were to be outcasts. The radio broadcasts referred to the Tutsi as cockroaches. By 1994 tensions in the Hutu community were at the breaking point resulting in a three-month-long rampage during which nearly one million Tutsi were slaughtered by Hutus.
Hutu Military

Photograph 13 Hutu Military

What Is the Difference?

Are the differences so great that nearly one million people were murdered in three months just because of perceived differences among ethnic groups?


An earlier genocide was perpetrated by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s in Europe. Anti-Jewish sentiment was already high throughout most of Europe, but the Nazi regime exacerbated the feelings through many forms of propaganda including a movie titled The Eternal Jew. This film was shown to people all over Germany—in fact, people were forced to watch it—making the Jews seem less than human, and giving Germans “permission” to turn on their Jewish neighbors. It also helped Germans to ignore the “final solution” in which more than six million Jews were murdered. Click here to see a clip from the film. (Flash video)

Does language really matter? Of course it does. It matters very much. It can turn us into murderers. Still not sure? Check out the Milgram Obedience Study and Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment. The language there is based on symbols of power, but it is language all the same.

This story is an illustration of the flipside of seeing the strange in the familiar: sociologists must also be able to see the familiar in the strange!

Let’s think for a moment about what these words mean: seeing the familiar in the strange. How can we do that? How can we make sense out of what seems like nonsense? That’s part of the work of the Sociologist: making sense out of things that might not seem to make sense by finding the underlying sense.

But seeing the general in the particular and linking the strange and the familiar are not the only components of the sociological perspective; sociologists must also be able to see personal choice in social context.
The Allegory of the Cave

Imagine that you were born and raised in a cave and your legs and neck were chained so that you could not move and you could see only directly in front of you. There is a fire burning.

Some light, of course, is allowed them, namely from a fire that casts its glow toward them from behind them, being above and at some distance. Between the fire and those who are shackled [i.e., behind their backs] there runs a walkway at a certain height. Imagine that a low wall has been built the length of the walkway, like the low curtain that puppeteers put up, over which they show their puppets. So now imagine that all along this low wall people are carrying all sorts of things that reach up higher than the wall: statues and other carvings made of stone or wood and many other artifacts that people have made. As you would expect, some are talking to each other [as they walk along] and some are silent. (Sheehan 2012)

Eventually you are freed and you go out into the light of the sun, but while you are shackled in that cave, “[your . . .] truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.” (Sheehan 2012) In other words, your world would be defined by the shadows that you see on the wall. The cave and the shadows are your only reality. The social construction of reality for you, is a kind of weird interaction with those who create the shadows, the shadows themselves, and you. All of your society is constrained by the boundaries of that cave just as ours is constrained by those around us with whom we interact each day.
Something to Ponder 7:

*(Can you answer these questions? If not, reread the course material)*

1. What kind of language do you use or do you hear that shapes your reality?
2. What do you do often that makes no real sense, but is just something you do in your family or your culture?
   a. Be specific and describe it.
   b. Google it or ask older family members.
3. Did you find anything?
   a. What do you think about what we discovered?
   b. How does that fit this topic”
4. Did you agree with the Study: Rap Music Linked to Sexism?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. Was the study conducted without bias or coercion?
   c. Was the study properly planned?
   d. Was the study properly conducted?
      i. Be very specific with your answers.

Applying the Paradigms/Perspectives

Many of the problems that are occurring in Northern Africa, the Middle East, and spilling over into Pakistan and Afghanistan (and indeed, throughout the world), may be attributed directly to the response of the United States to the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. Historians and scholars who don’t have an axe to grind in terms of political discourse or political favoritism generally argue today (July 2015) that ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Boko-Haram in Northern Nigeria and Chad, and al Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya exist because of the American military action against Iraq in 2003 and lasting through 2014. These are only a small but vicious handful of terrorist organizations that are plaguing civilized people everywhere. Each of the following is a look at the ways in which our three major sociological perspectives describe and explain these conflicts.

Current World Conflict

*Structural-Functionalism*

- The war in Iraq which began in 2003, according to the Structural-Functionalist paradigm/perspective, is being fought in order to maintain security and stability in the US by keeping terrorism at bay thousands of miles away.

- The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack was an act of extreme deviance caused by anomic conditions (conditions of social chaos when the rules for normative behavior seem to have disappeared) in the Middle East and among Muslim people throughout the world. Because of the cultural influence of the American media throughout the world, and because of the rapidity of social change taking place due to that cultural influence, the terrorists engaged in an act of deviance based on their belief that they were acting at the behest of God, and for the good of their own people, that took their own lives as well as the lives of thousands of others.
Social Conflict Theory

- The war in Iraq which began in 2003, according to the Conflict paradigm/perspective, was being fought in order to extend the power and control of the United States, and to create an American empire in the non-white, non-Christian world.

- The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack was caused by American foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East as a whole, the first Gulf War, American support of the Israeli government and Israel’s treatment of its Palestinian population. The Bourgeoisie (the United States and most of Western Europe) has exploited for decades the people and natural resources of the Middle East without offering economic and educational support to the people. The U.S. and Western Europe have supported dictatorial regimes, ignored human rights abuses, and generally turned their backs on the plight of the majority of Middle Easterners and Muslims in general throughout the world. Thus, the terrorists (as representatives of the Proletariat), attacked, or attempted to attack, the centers of American power: the World Trade Center (economic power), the Pentagon (military power), and the U.S. Capital (political power).

Symbolic Interactionism

- The war in Iraq which began in 2003, according to the Symbolic Interactionist paradigm/perspective, is being fought to send a message to Islamic terrorists that the US cannot be attacked with impunity, and to support the image of non-white, non-Christian people as dangerous to our way of life.

- The September 11, 2001 terrorists used the symbols of American power—the World Trade Center, New York City, the Pentagon, Washington, D.C.—in order to deliver a message to the world concerning their perception that the United States is the cause of the misery of Muslims in the Middle East as well as throughout the world. The perception of reality is often more real than the concrete reality itself, because sometimes we act based on what we think or believe more strongly than on what is really real. The actions of the terrorists were a form of language, a method of communication that was extreme, because the message was extreme.

[Interested in learning more about the war in Iraq? Check out this episode of Frontline about veterans of the war.]

Deviance

Structural-Functionalism

- Behaviors are not offensive because they are deviant; they are deviant because they offend.

- Deviance is usually dysfunctional for society and arises from conditions of anomie.

- Deviance may be functional for society because it may bring about necessary social change.
- Deviance is integral to human societies. Deviance exists in all societies, and all societies create institutionalized methods of preventing and punishing deviance.

**Social Conflict Theory**

- Deviance is defined by those in power; therefore, what is deviant, is whatever offends the powerful, or whatever causes them to believe that they are losing power and control over the masses.

- Deviance is conditional, situational, and relative to time, place, situation, and culture.

- By declaring that certain groups are deviant, or treating certain groups as if they are, in some way, outside the boundaries of mainstream society, the ultimate in-group is able to maintain its power.

- Deviance exists in all societies, and all societies create institutionalized methods of preventing and punishing deviance.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

- Deviance is conditional, situational, and relative to time, place, situation, and culture.

- Deviance is based on the perceptions of individuals.

- The language used to label groups or individuals as deviant is highly symbolic and “coded.”

- Individuals have the capacity to accept or reject the labels that society creates.

**Inequality**

**Structural-Functionalism**

- Inequality is less widespread than the Conflictualists believe.

- Inequality, in general, is functional for society because it engenders competition which serves as an incentive for people to attempt to rise to the top.

- Inequality, overall, is highly dysfunctional for society because it fails to permit large groups of people from competing for the goods of society.

- Inequality is always functional (adaptive) for some segments of society and dysfunctional (non-adaptive) for others.
Social Conflict Theory

- Inequality is generated and maintained by those in power in order to maintain their power.

- Various groups in society are delineated by those in power and then are pitted against each other in a struggle for wealth, power, and status.

- The powerful exploit everyone in order to engender false consciousness—the belief that the non-elites have the potential to become rich and powerful.

- The elites will do anything in order to maintain their power.

Symbolic Interactionism

- Inequality is based on individual reactions to their own perceptions of the social structure.

- Because the social structure is subjective, inequality is also subjective and based on individual interpretations.

Education

Structural-Functionalism

- Enhances the operation and stability of society by systematically teaching certain cognitive skills and knowledge, and transmitting these skills and knowledge from one generation to the next generation.

- Education has several manifest and latent functions for society.

- Cultural transmission passes culture from one generation to the next and established social values are taught thoroughly.

- Education also serves to enhance social and cultural integration in society by bringing together people from diverse social backgrounds so that they share widespread social experiences and thus acquire commonly held societal norms, attitudes and beliefs.

Social Conflict Theory

- Schools routinely provide learning according to students’ social background, thereby perpetuating social inequality.

- Wealthy School districts have better buildings, state of the art technology, higher teacher salaries, more ancillary programs such as Art and Music and better sports equipment.

- Schools serve as a screening device to fill positions of unequal status.
Tracking is a basic screening device - placing of students perceived to have similar intelligence and academic abilities in the same classroom.

Credentialism is the overemphasis on educational credentials for job placement. The result is that many individuals are placed in jobs for which they are overeducated.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

- Schools play a vital role in shaping the way students see reality and themselves.
- Authoritarianism prevalent in schools impedes learning and encourages undemocratic behavior later in life.
- Schools create serious difficulties for students who are “labeled” as learning disabled or less academically competent than their peers; these students may never be able to see themselves as good students and move beyond these labels.
- Teacher expectations play a huge role in student achievement. If students are made to feel like high achievers, they will act like high achievers, and vice versa.

**Something to Ponder 8:**

*(Can you answer these questions? If not, reread the course material)*

1. Take one of the paradigms/perspectives and one of the institutions of society and create your own example using both of them.
2. Answer the “Something to Ponder 2” questions, below.

**Something to Ponder 9:**

1. What makes the sociological perspective different from other ways of looking at the world?
2. What issues or topics do you think lend themselves to sociological inquiry and the use of the sociological imagination?
3. How would you “do” sociology? (You will learn about this in the next chapter.)
Answers to: What Has Been Described?

I know it’s upside down! Thanks for noticing! 😊

**Example 3:** In many parts of the Middle East, it is common for men to wear the traditional thobe or bisht. It is also common for male friends to hold hands while walking down the street. It is a sign of friendship and has no sexual connotations at all. You might have thought that you were in the midst of a predominately gay area of the city, but if you think about it more carefully you were probably taught to hold hands with your friends and classmates when you were children. At some point, in the US, we stop holding hands except with children, people with whom we are in love, with our opposite-sex parents, or with the elderly. The strange in this case is the men holding hands, but hand-holding is a familiar and common practice that in the US is often age and sex dependent. In fact, George W. Bush—former president of the United States—publicly held hands with a Middle Eastern leader during his time in office.
Answers to: What Has Been Described?

I know it’s upside down! Thanks for noticing! 😊

**Example 1:** Most people who have grown up in the United States would not think anything about this scenario and might even participate willingly and joyfully. In the US we call this Halloween and it is a “holiday” that occurs every October 31. Children dress up and go from door-to-door saying “Trick or Treat” and are given candy. Many people have Halloween parties, and many people say that it’s their favorite holiday and decorate their houses with all manner of spiders and webs, and ghoulish devices. “Haunted” houses are a multi-million dollar business and people pay anywhere from $10.00-$35.00 per person to walk through a “house of horrors” and be frightened.

**Example 2:** Roman Catholic Christians might recognize this as celebrating the birthday of their savior Jesus Christ and taking Holy Communion on Christmas Day.
Sources, References, and Works Cited

Much of the information and many of the definitions in this book have been borrowed and altered from textbooks by Dalton Conley (Conley 2008) and John Macionis (Macionis 2008).


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End Notes

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9 Image from http://joelbest.net/

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11 Image Courtesy of the CDC (http://www.cdc.gov/)

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22 Photo of poster courtesy of: http://store.nrm.org/browse.cfm/4,199.html. This illustration first appeared in Look magazine in 1964 and is titled “The Problem We All Live With.”


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