THIRD EDITION
SOCIOLOGY

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SOCIETY AND HUMAN INTERACTION

In Part 2, we shall examine human societies and the interactions that take place between individuals within societies, and between individuals and the societies in which they live. We begin this process in Chapter 3 by examining three sociological perspectives on society and interaction. Throughout the book, we will see how sociologists use insights arising from these perspectives to aid in our understanding of virtually every aspect of society and human interaction.

We begin this process in Chapter 4 by examining *culture* (beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, and ways of life that are shared within a society) and *social structure* (the arrangement of social positions in a society). Culture and social structure are perhaps the two most central concepts in sociology, and they are intricately interrelated. Culture is a product of social structure, but at the same time it can act either to perpetuate or to change that social structure. In order to participate in society, everyone must learn about his or her culture and social structure. This process, called *socialization,* is discussed in Chapter 5. How we experience it is largely a product of whether we are born male or female. The different and unequal roles of men and women, the reasons these roles persist, the means by which they are learned, and changes in these roles are the topics of Chapter 6.

In Chapter 7, we shall examine social structure at levels below that of entire societies—groups and organizations. We will see how the dynamics of interaction within groups can lead people to make decisions and take actions that they would never do on their own.

Finally, in Chapter 8, we shall examine how societies and cultures interact with individuals in ways that lead those individuals to conform to the will of the larger collectivity. At the same time, we shall examine why some people *don't* conform. We shall discover that there are sometimes important things that such nonconformity does for society, as well as the more familiar ways that it may threaten or change society.
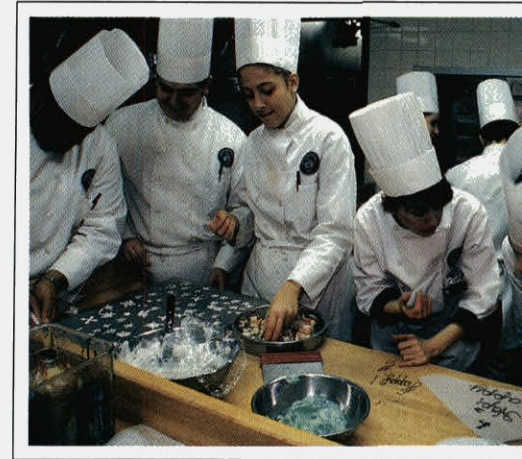
PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIETY AND INTERACTION

Consider the following three statements:

"The system is stacked against us. The rich people make the rules, and they make rules that let them keep their money while we have to pay. Ordinary working people don't have a chance; the rich just get richer and the poor get poorer."

"The system certainly isn't perfect, but most of the time it works well for most people. People have been mistreated in the past, but our system allows them to act to change that; look at all the once-poor immigrant groups that are now solidly middle class. If you start messing with what works, a lot of people could suffer."

"The problem is that poor people have such low expectations. They believe that they will never have a chance to amount to anything, so they don't even try. They give up, drop out of school, and raise their children with the same sense of hopelessness. Change those perceptions and you begin to change society."

Clearly, these three statements represent very different viewpoints. The third differs from the other two in that it sees a societal characteristic — the distribution of poverty —as reflecting the thoughts and perceptions of individuals. Change those thoughts and perceptions, it suggests, and the income distribution might well change as a result. The other two look at things the opposite way: They see society as a force acting on the individual. However, they see the nature of the force quite differently. The first quote sees us as largely programmed by society for wealth or poverty, depending on the group into which we were born. The second sees society as functioning effectively — though imperfect, it nonetheless offers us opportunities and its effectiveness could be diminished were the structures of society changed.

PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY

The opinion of each of the people quoted above reflects one of the three main *perspectives* that have been influential in sociology. A **perspective** can be defined as an overall approach or viewpoint toward a subject, including (1) a set of *questions* to be asked about the subject, (2) a general *theory* or theoretical approach to explaining the nature of the subject, and often (3) a set of *values* relating to the subject.

Sociologists propose dozens of important theories and ask thousands of questions, but to a large extent these theories and questions can be linked to one or more of the three major perspectives in the field. These perspectives are the *functionalist perspective* (represented by the second quote above), the *conflict perspective* (represented by the first quote), and the *symbolic-interactionist perspective* (represented by the third quote). Each of these perspectives offers a distinct theory concerning the key social forces that shape human behavior and society. In other words, they offer different explanations for why people behave as they do. For this reason, each of them asks and attempts to answer somewhat different kinds of questions. A sociologist's preference for one or the other of these perspectives may also reflect his or her values to some extent. Here I am referring to two kinds of values: *views about what society should be like,* and preferences concerning the kinds of questions the sociologist asks.

MACROSOCIOLOGY I: THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Two of the three perspectives we shall be considering, the functionalist perspective and the conflict perspective, fall under the category of **macrosociology**. In other words, they are mainly concerned with explaining large-scale social patterns. Often the unit of analysis is an entire society, and these perspectives may compare different societies or the same society in different historical periods. The third perspective, the symbolic-interactionist perspective, is *microsociological,* largely concerned with the subfield of sociology known as *social psychology,* introduced in Chapter 1. In other words, it is more concerned with processes that operate at the individual level and with the interaction between individuals and the larger society. We shall turn our attention first to the functionalist perspective.

The Functionalist Perspective Defined

The **functionalist perspective** is known by a number of different names, including *order perspective* and *structural-functionalism,* all of which refer to the same general theoretical viewpoint. The basic social theory underlying this perspective is sometimes referred to as *systems theory.* The early sociologist who probably had the greatest influence over the development of this theory was Emile Durkheim. Among the most influential modern functionalist theorists have been the American sociologists Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. These individuals are examined in the box entitled "Functionalist Theory."

The functionalist perspective is primarily concerned with why a society assumes a particular form. This perspective assumes that *any society takes its particular form because that form works well for the society given its particular situation.* Societies exist under a wide range of environmental situations. Some, for example, exist in harsh Arctic, desert, or mountain climates, whereas others exist in temperate climates and fertile environments. Levels of technology also vary widely. Some societies have highly advanced industrial technologies, whereas others engage in subsistence farming. Societies also differ in terms of their interactions with other societies. Some have hostile neighbors; others have friendly neighbors. All of these elements make up the total environment within which a society must exist, and each combination of these elements forces a society to adapt in a particular set of ways. Thus, *what works for one society cannot be expected to work for another.*

In any society, however, the functionalist theoretical perspective makes one basic argument. Whatever the characteristics of the society, *those characteristics developed because they met the needs of that society* in its particular situation. Having now provided a general statement describing the functionalist perspective, let us look at several of its key principles in greater detail. These principles include *interdependency, functions of social structure and culture, consensus and cooperation,* and *equilibrium.*

FUNCTIONALIST THEORY

EMILE DURKHEIM (1858–1917)

Much of functionalist thinking about the importance of interdependency as a force for cohesion in society can be traced to the writings of Emile Durkheim. In his first major work, *De la Division du Travail Social* (*The Division of Labor in Society*) (Durkheim, 1947 [orig. 1893]), he argued that in preindustrial societies, tradition, unquestioned belief, and forced conformity are the main forces holding society together. He referred to this as *mechanical solidarity.* In modern societies, these forces are replaced by interdependency. Durkheim called this new pattern *organic solidarity* because he saw the interdependency in society as being similar to the interdependency of the organs of a living being.

Durkheim's recognition of the importance of consensus can be seen in another major concept he developed, *anomie* or the state of normlessness (Durkheim, 1964 [orig. 1897]). By this Durkheim meant that in certain situations norms—rules of behavior—break down and become inoperative. This may occur during periods of rapid social change or intense conflict, and when it does, people are more likely to engage in behavior that is destructive to them or their society. Durkheim (1964 [orig. 1897]) illustrated this point in his pioneering study of suicide.

TALCOTT PARSONS (1902–1979)

Functionalist theory became especially influential in the United States, where its leading proponent was Talcott Parsons. One of Parsons's major contributions to sociology was the notion that each piece of the social structure represents some underlying function. According to his theory of *structural-functionalism,* there are four particularly crucial functions, necessary in any society, that in turn are met by particular *systems of action* within society (Parsons, 1966, 1971): *integration,* holding the society together and forming a basis for cooperation, which is attained through the social system; *pattern maintenance,* the development and maintenance of common values, which is attained through the cultural system; *goal attainment,* a motivational force that creates the incentive to work and cooperate, which is attained through the personality system; and *adaptation* to the environment, which is attained through the behavioral organism, which Parsons took to include the economic system.

ROBERT MERTON (1910–   )

Although Robert Merton studied under Parsons and is generally identified with the functionalist perspective, certain elements of his thinking have been influenced by the conflict perspective as well. Unlike Durkheim and Parsons, who attempted to develop grand theories to explain the basic nature of society, Merton has often sought to develop *middle-range theories* that seek to describe and explain a narrower range of behaviors with a greater degree of precision. Merton (1967) has argued that such theories better lend themselves to testing through research than do larger-scale theories.

In keeping with his notion of middle-range theories, Merton has written on a number of specialty areas within sociology, including the sociology of science and race and ethnic relations and especially deviant behavior (Merton, 1938, 1968).

Key Principles of the Functionalist Perspective

Interdependency   One of the most important principles of functionalist theory is that *society is made up of interdependent parts.* This means that every part of society is dependent to some extent on other parts of society, so that what happens at one place in society has important effects elsewhere. Early social thinkers in this tradition often likened the operation of society to that of a living organism. Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim all used this analogy. Think of your own body. Your entire body

depends upon your heart, brain, lungs, stomach, and liver for its survival. Each of these organs provides a vital function. A malfunction in any one of them can affect the health of your entire body. These early sociologists saw society as operating in much the same way.

If this was true a century ago when Comte and Spencer were developing their social theories, it is even more true today. Society has become more complex and more interdependent, not less so. Just think for a moment of all the people upon whom your participation in your introductory sociology course depends. Obviously, the class requires a faculty member to teach it and students to take it. However, it also depends on many other people and organizations. Someone has to provide the electricity to light the room, and in order for that electricity to be provided, someone had to build a dam or mine some coal, oil, or uranium and get that fuel to the power plant. Someone also had to decide when the class would be held and in what room, communicate that information to you, and enroll you in that class. Someone had to write the book, with the assistance of many other people: printers, editors, proofreaders, salespeople, and bookstore employees. Thus, a class that seems to involve just you, your fellow students, and your professor is in fact the product of the efforts of hundreds of people. Consider also that a failure on the part of any element of this complicated system could affect your *participation in this class.* Your name could be left off the instructor's class list; the book could arrive late or in insufficient numbers at the bookstore; there could be a power failure; the class could be scheduled in the same room as another class.

Functions of Social Structure and Culture Closely related to interdependency is the idea that each part of the social system exists because it serves some **function**. This notion is applied by functionalists to both social structure and culture. *Social structure* refers to the organization of society, including its institutions, its social positions, and its distribution of resources. *Culture* refers to a set of beliefs, language, rules, values, and knowledge held in common by the members of a society. (These concepts are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.) According to the functionalist perspective, each of the various elements of social structure performs a function for society. In other words, it meets some need in the society or somehow contributes to the effective operation of the society. Here again, the analogy to a living organism is apparent: Just as each organ has its function to perform, so does each part of society.

Much the same is true of culture. If a society has a rule or belief, the theory argues, that rule or belief likely exists because it is in some way useful for the society. Consider, for example, the *postpartum sex taboo,* a common rule in many preindustrial societies. This rule specifies that a woman may not have sex for some set period after the birth of a child. The length of time covered by the postpartum taboo has ranged from a few weeks to several years. Although few people realized it, this rule was very useful. When the mother is breast-feeding her baby and her own diet is barely adequate, becoming pregnant could so deplete the nutrients in her breast milk that her baby could become seriously malnourished. Thus, in such societies, the health of babies — and consequently, the perpetuation of the society itself — depended on the mother's not becom-

The upheaval in Lebanon is a graphic example of what happens when consensus on basic social values breaks down.

ing pregnant again too soon after giving birth. The postpartum sex taboo prevented this. Therefore, whatever religious or mystical beliefs may have served as the basis for this rule, it turns out that the rule performed an important function for society.

Societal functions that are obvious and openly stated are referred to as **manifest functions**. A manifest function of education, for example, is to teach children about such subjects as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Sometimes, however, functions are not obvious or openly acknowledged. These are called **latent functions**. A latent function of education is baby-sitting: School relieves parents of the responsibility of taking care of their children. Thus, the parents are free to pursue other efforts or simply to take a break from child care. Latent functions are often unintentional: The school system was not set up for the purpose of baby-sitting, but it does serve that purpose. Although latent functions are less obvious than manifest functions, they can be just as important to society. For this reason, sociologists operating out of the functionalist perspective have devoted much effort to identifying the latent functions of social structure and culture.

Consensus and Cooperation   Another key principle in functionalist theory is that societies have a tendency toward *consensus;* that is, to have certain basic values that nearly everyone in the society agrees upon. Americans, for example, nearly all agree that they believe in freedom and democracy. They may not agree on exactly what they mean by either freedom or democracy, and they also may disagree on the extent to which the United States has attained these ideals. However, as ideals or principles that a society ought to strive for, the overwhelming majority of Americans express support for freedom and democracy.

According to functionalists, societies tend toward consensus in order to achieve *cooperation.* As we have already seen, the interdependency in society requires that people cooperate. If people in even one part of such an interdependent system fail to cooperate with people elsewhere in the system, the effects will be felt throughout the entire system. People are more likely to cooperate when they share similar values and goals. According to Durkheim (1947 [orig. 1893]; 1953 [orig. 1898]), they are especially likely to cooperate when they feel that they share things in common with one another; he referred to such unity as *solidarity.*

What happens when a society lacks consensus? According to functionalists, inability to cooperate will paralyze the society, and people will devote more and more effort to fighting one another rather than getting anything done. This process can be seen in former Yugoslavia and parts of the former Soviet Union as well as in Lebanon. When the fall of communism brought an end to forced conformity in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe,

lack of consensus led to social breakdown in several areas. Civil war erupted between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, and between Bosnians and Serbians in the former Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, leading to thousands of deaths and state of virtual anarchy. In 1992 and 1993, Serbian residents of the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, laid siege to the city and bombarded their own neighbors, schools, and businesses. The reason for this self-destruction was the lack of consensus between the Christian Serbs and the Bosnian Muslims who controlled the city. Lebanon has similarly been paralyzed by the inability of the Sunni Muslims, Shi'ite Muslims and Christians (as well as several other religious groups) to cooperate.

While they are extreme cases, all of these examples illustrate a key point: a society that lacks any consensus whatsoever will have a very hard time surviving as a society.

Equilibrium   A final principle of functionalist theorists is that of *equilibrium.* This view holds that, once a society has achieved the form that is best adapted to its situation, it has reached a state of balance or equilibrium, and it will remain in that condition until it is forced to change by some new condition. New technology, a change in climate, or contact with an outside society are all conditions to which a society might have to adapt. When such conditions occur, *social change* will take place: Society will change just enough to adapt to the new situation. However, once that adaptation has been made, the society has attained a new state of balance with its environment, and it will not change again until some new situation requires further adaptation. The picture that emerges from the functionalist perspective, then, is that of a basically stable, well-functioning system that changes only when it has to, and then only enough to adapt to changes in its situation. In short, the natural tendency of society is to be stable, because society is a smoothly operating, interdependent system.

Functions and Dysfunctions

An important refinement of the functionalist perspective has been made by Robert Merton (1968). Merton has argued that even social arrangements that are useful to society can have **dysfunctions** or consequences that are harmful to society. No matter how useful something is, it can still have negative side effects. In general, functionalist theory argues that when the functions outweigh the dysfunctions, a social arrangement will likely continue to exist because, on balance, it is useful to society. However, because situations change, a condition that is functional today can become dysfunctional in the future. Thus, when studying any element of social structure or culture, sociologists typically raise questions about its possible functions and dysfunctions.

MACROSOCIOLOGY II: THE CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE

Although the **conflict perspective** can trace its intellectual roots to ancient Chinese, Greek, and Arabian philosophers, modern conflict theory is largely an outgrowth of the theories of Karl Marx. There are many kinds of conflict theories today, a number of which disagree in important ways with Marx's analysis. Nonetheless, the basic Marxian notion of different groups in society having conflicting self-interests remains influential in most modern conflict theories. Modern conflict theory has been refined by the German theorist Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) and by American sociologists C. Wright Mills (1956) and Randall Collins (1979, 1975).

The Conflict Perspective Defined

Like the functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective is a macrosociological perspective that addresses the question "Why does society take the form that it does?" However, conflict theory gives a very different answer to this question. Its answer is that *different groups in society have conflicting self-interests, and the nature of the society is determined by the outcome of the conflict among these groups.* To conflict theorists, the most important force shaping society is conflicting self-interests among different groups within society. The conflict perspective is examined in the "Conflict Theory" box.

Conflicting Self-Interests   Why, according to conflict theorists, do different groups in society have conflicting self-interests? The reason is that every society experiences competition over **scarce resources**. A scarce resource is anything that does not exist in sufficient amounts for everyone to have all that he or she wants. The most important scarce resources in society, those which produce the greatest competition, are money (and the things it can buy) and power. Whenever a resource is scarce, one person's gain is potentially another's loss. If you have more money or power, the result may very well be that I have less, because there is only so much to go around. It is this feature that produces conflict: Groups struggle with one another to increase their share of money and power, often by reducing the money and power of others. In this struggle, the interests of those who have a good deal of money and power conflict with the interests of those who do not. The self-interest of those who have money and power is to keep things as they are so that they can continue to enjoy an advantaged position. This group will attempt to preserve the **status quo** — the existing set of arrangements. The self-interest of *those who lack money and power is just the opposite.* They want to create *change* so that they can get a bigger share of wealth and power.

This point of view differs significantly from the functionalist perspective. Whereas the functionalist perspective sees the various elements of society as being interdependent, conflict theorists believe that the various human elements of society are in conflict with one another because one group's gain is potentially another group's loss.

Bias in Social Structure and Culture   As noted above, the distribution of scarce resources such as money and power is usually unequal. Those who have money often have power, and vice versa. There are many debates among conflict theorists about the precise relationship between money and power, but there is one key point on which most conflict theorists agree: Those who have disproportionate amounts of money and power can use their power to maintain their privileged position. In other words, they have the power to shape society to their own advantage. The result of this is that a society tends to take on characteristics that work to the further advantage of the dominant groups within that society.

Here, too, there is an important parallel to functionalist theory. As we saw, functionalists argue that societies assume the characteristics they do because those characteristics are functional — useful to the society. Conflict theorists agree up to a point — but they ask the question, "Functional for *whom?*" In other words, they believe that social arrangements exist because they are useful — but *not* to the whole society. Rather, they are useful to the *dominant group* in society — whatever advantaged group has the power to shape society according to its own interests. This power can be exercised in a variety of ways. The wealthy are frequently in positions to influence public opinion. Dominant groups in many societies try (often successfully) to gain control of the media, which is why freedom of the press is repressed in much of the world. Even where it is not, those with money have a better chance than others of being able to communicate through the media. The wealthy may be overrepresented in governments or may even control *them directly. Other key institutions such as education and religion are often disproportionately influenced by dominant groups, or if not, they may be unwilling to challenge such groups. Finally, there is always the possibility of a dominant group using force to shape a society to its own interests.

Conflicting Values and Ideologies   Because different groups in society have conflicting self-interests, it is virtually certain, according to conflict theory, that they will have different views about social issues. In short, their values and *ideologies* — systems of beliefs about reality — will be based in large part on what serves their self-interests. Those in the *dominant group use their considerable power to promote belief in the values and ideologies that support the existing order (Mannheim, 1936 [orig. 1929]; Marx, 1964). When

CONFLICT THEORY

KARL MARX (1818–1883)

Karl Marx has probably had more influence over conflict theory than any other sociologist. Marx's theories concerning ownership of the means of production and concerning the bourgeoisie and the proletariat were discussed in Chapter 1. He argued that in industrial societies, the bourgeoisie uses its power to ensure that all elements of the social structure and ideology support its continued ownership of the means of production. The proletariat, in contrast, has an interest in change.

Much of Marx's social thinking can be found in *Capital* (1967), originally published in *three* volumes between 1867 and 1894.

RALF DAHRENDORF (1929–)

The German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf is credited with making important modifications in conflict theory to make it more applicable to twentieth-century industrial societies. One way his theories differ from those of Marx is that he gives *power a more central* role than Marx did. Marx saw power as purely an outgrowth of owning the means of production, whereas Dahrendorf has identified other bases of power, including legal authority. Thus, conflicts of

interest exist between those who have power and those who lack it, just as they exist between those who own wealth and those who do not. Like Marx, Dahrendorf does not believe that people are always aware of what their self-interests are. When a group of people share a common social position (such as being employed in similar types of work around the country by the same employer), they have common self-interests. When they are unaware of these self-interests, they have what Dahrendorf (1959) calls *latent interests*. At some point, however, they may become aware of their common self-interests and try to advance them. At this stage, they have developed and articulated *manifest interests*.

This step represents an intermediate step between the existence of conflicting interests (always present in society) and the actual emergence of social conflict (only sometimes present).

C. WRIGHT MILLS (1916–1962)

Probably the most influential conflict theorist in American sociology has been C. Wright Mills. Like Dahrendorf, Mills sought to apply conflict theory to modern industrial capitalism. He felt that one consequence of the massive

scale of corporations and governments in modern society is to make the elite less visible and more removed from the people. As a result, the elite have greater power, and the masses feel powerless and, therefore, increasingly cynical and apathetic about politics (Mills, 1956).

Mills (1956) believed that in the United States major political decisions are made by a *power elite* consisting of top corporate executives, high military commanders, and the executive branch of the federal government. Mills's ideas set the stage for an important tradition of research in sociology, described in Chapter 10, and there are some who say that they offer a good explanation of such events as the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Iran-contra scandal.

Mills also spoke and wrote often of "the sociological imagination"; in fact, he published a book with that title in 1961. By this term, Mills meant that we should seek to distinguish *personal troubles* — problems affecting particular individuals as a result of something they did or didn't do — from *social problems* — conditions affecting many people, which, although they may think of them in personal terms, are in reality a product of larger societal processes or conditions.

they succeed, as they often do, subordinate groups accept the dominant group's ideology and believe things that are not in their own interest to believe, a condition Marx called *false consciousness*. (This concept will be explored further in

Chapter 4.) Sooner or later, however, subordinate groups come to see that their interests conflict with those of the dominant group, and when this happens, they develop their own values and beliefs, which naturally conflict with those

advocated by the dominant group. Thus, the inherent tendency of society is toward conflict, not consensus. Conflict comes from within society because different groups have conflicting self-interests and thus try to shape society and its values in different and conflicting ways.

CONFLICT VERSUS VIOLENCE   It is very important to stress here that *conflict does not mean the same thing as violence.* Certainly conflict can be violent, as in the case of riots and revolutions. However, nonviolent conflict is more common. Conflict occurs in legislatures, as opposing interest groups seek to pass laws and policies from which they can benefit. It occurs in the courts, as different groups pursue legal strategies to get the law interpreted in their interests. Collective bargaining and civil rights panels are other mechanisms for dealing with conflict. All of these processes reflect the **institutionalization** of conflict. They reflect the fact that society has recognized that conflict will occur and has developed ways of dealing with it. You can argue, as many conflict theorists do, that dominant groups develop institutions for dealing with conflict that favor their own interests. Even so, the fact remains that conflict does often occur in peaceful, institutional settings. It also sometimes occurs peacefully outside such institutional settings, as in the case of mass demonstrations and nonviolent civil disobedience. In general, when institutional means of resolving conflict exist, *and* when disadvantaged groups perceive that such institutional settings offer a fair opportunity for resolving conflict, these groups will use them. If such means do not exist, however, or if disadvantaged groups believe that these means favor the advantaged groups, conflict will occur outside institutional settings (Coser, 1956). In this situation, violence becomes more likely.

THE ROLES OF CONFLICT   Conflict theorists see conflict not only as natural and normal, but also as useful to society. Conflict, they argue, brings social change, which makes two things possible. First, it offers disadvantaged groups an opportunity to improve their position in society through a more equitable distribution of scarce resources. Second, it offers society an opportunity to function better, because conflict creates the possibility of eliminating social arrangements that are harmful to the society as a whole but serve the interests of the dominant group.

Consider environmental pollution as an example of this principle. At one time in the United States and other countries, there was very little regulation of industrial activities that pollute the air or water or of the dumping of hazardous wastes. Because it was cheaper to discharge hazardous materials into the environment than to dispose of them properly, many industries did so. These industries opposed any attempt to stop them from such dumping by appealing to distrust of government and invoking the evils of government regulation. However, heightened public
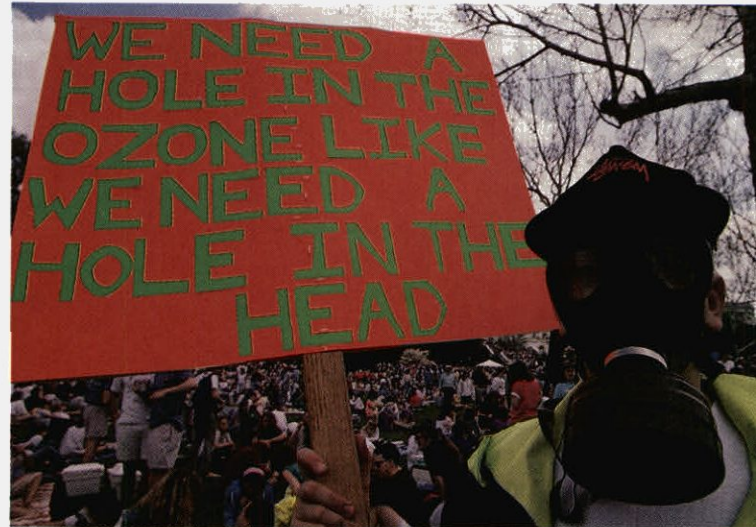
Conflict can bring social change. Conflict between environmentalists and industrial polluters has led to passage of environmental regulations such as the Clean Air Act that benefit society.

awareness of the risks to health, quality of life, and long-term survival led to strong environmental movements in the 1960s and early 1970s, and again in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In both time periods, conflicts arose between environmentalists and industrial polluters. These conflicts led to passage of environmental regulations, such as the banning of new cars using leaded gasoline in the 1970s, and the 1990 Clean Air Act. They also led to heightened public consciousness of environmental issues that forced even the industrial polluters to profess concern for the environment by the late 1980s — in contrast to Earth Day 1970, Earth Day 1990 received millions of dollars in corporate support. The new regulations and the heightened public awareness led in turn to considerable reductions in some kinds of pollution. Lead pollution, for example, decreased sharply in both the air and water as use of leaded gasoline declined during the 1980s (Alexander and Smith, 1988; Smith, Alexander, and Wolman, 1987; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1990). Similarly, the 1990 Clean Air Act was passed with the express purpose of reducing emission of pollutants that deplete the ozone layer and that cause acid rain.

Of course, the decreases in air and water pollution mentioned above do not mean that the problem of the environment has been solved. As gains are made in some areas, we continue to discover new ways in which human activity is threatening the environment. A growing current threat is the risk of global warming resulting from both air pollution and massive cutting of rain forests. A related problem is the extinction of growing numbers of life forms

because of elimination of habitat resulting from logging, farming, and urbanization. At the environmental summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the U.S. government resisted taking strong action on these issues because of the threat such action would pose to American corporate interests. At the same time, the environmental movement in the United States and elsewhere exerted strong pressure to adopt different policies. Again, conflict is playing a central role in the formation of environmental policy, and the outcome of that conflict will likely have important effects on global warming and endangered species.

CONFLICT AND SOCIAL CHANGE The environment is a good example of how conflict can result in social change. However, functionalist and conflict theorists disagree about the role played in social change by conflicts within society. Functionalists see social change as coming largely from outside society. They see it as a response to some new technology, some change in the environment, or some interaction with another society. Conflict theorists, however, see change as coming from within society. Different groups have opposing interests and thus engage in conflict; that conflict produces change. Therefore, to conflict theorists, it was not simply the presence of air pollution that brought about regulations to control it. Rather, change arose from people's reaction to the fact that they were threatened by pollution. They developed a social movement, engaged in conflict with those who had an economic self-interest in continuing to pollute, and helped bring about a new policy and a cleaner environment.

MACROSOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES: IS SYNTHESIS POSSIBLE?

The differences between the functionalist and conflict schools have led sociologists to ask an important question: Are the two theories incompatible, or are societies sufficiently complex so that both theories could be right at the same time?

This question has not been answered to the satisfaction of all sociologists, and debate continues concerning the compatibility or incompatibility of the two perspectives. However, I believe — and I think most sociologists believe — that although they disagree on key points, the functionalist and conflict perspectives are not totally incompatible. In the first place, certain social arrangements might be useful to society in some ways and useful to the dominant group in others. Society might also contain forces for both consensus and conflict; under different conditions, one or the other can predominate. Let us examine each of these ideas a bit further.

Can Social Structure Be Simultaneously Biased and Functional?

Can social structure serve the interests of the dominant group and society as a whole at the same time? Let us illustrate this question with an example. Functionalist and conflict sociologists have been debating the causes of social inequality for decades. In short, functionalists have argued that inequality exists because it creates incentives that make society more productive, whereas conflict theorists have argued that inequality exists because it benefits the rich and powerful. They argue that the level of inequality in the United States cannot be explained by a need for productivity, partly because much of the inequality is inherited and thus cannot operate as an incentive. To this, the functionalists reply, "Show me a society without inequality. Inequality exists in all societies that produce a surplus because it serves a useful purpose in those societies." I shall explore this debate much further in Chapter 9 and have no intention of trying to resolve it here. However, I would like to point out that *both* theories could be partly correct. Perhaps inequality does produce incentives that societies need, and perhaps that is why it exists in essentially every society, as functionalists point out. It may also be true, however, that *more* social inequality exists in the United States than is needed to create incentives for productivity, and the reason for this could be the use of power by the wealthy to keep and expand their wealth. Assuming that each theory is partly right, the key sociological question becomes this: What is the relative importance of the two causes of social inequality? That is a challenging research question. Suppose for a moment that each reason — society's productivity needs and the desire of the powerful to maintain their wealth — offers part of the answer. If this were the case — and it is very possible that it is (see Lenski, 1966) — we would have to consider both the functionalist and conflict theories in order to ask the right research questions and to understand the causes of social inequality in the United States.

Simultaneous Forces for Conflict and Cooperation

As was noted in Chapter 1, Talcott Parsons and his structural-functionalist theories heavily dominated American sociology from the end of World War II into the early 1960s. Since that time, however, conflict theories have become much more influential in American sociology, and since the late 1960s, Marx has been taken far more seriously as a sociological theorist than he was in the 1950s. Today, no single theoretical paradigm dominates American sociology the way functionalism did in the 1950s. Why? Although there are undoubtedly many reasons, one likely reason is that society changed.

In the United States in the 1950s, the economy was growing, we had recently been victorious in two wars that had enjoyed popular support, and, to all outward appearances, we enjoyed consensus on basic values. By 1970, things had changed dramatically. The country was bitterly divided over the war in Vietnam, and the civil rights movement had brought dramatic changes in race relations (legally, at least). Hundreds of cities had experienced racial violence. John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X had been assassinated, demonstrators had been beaten outside the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, and students had been shot by National Guardsmen on college campuses. Old rules no longer seemed to operate, as young people smoked marijuana, preached "free love," and dressed and wore their hair in ways that shocked many in the older generation. In short, conflict seemed to have become the rule overnight.

Sociologists responded to these developments by rethinking their theories. Those theories that emphasized change and conflict became far more popular than they had been a decade earlier. From the hindsight of another two decades, though, many sociologists have come to believe that forces for both conflict and change exist in American society, and that the different conditions of the 1950s and 1960s brought different forces to the surface. From this viewpoint, society always had a need to cooperate, but it also always had certain conditions that divided it.

In the 1950s, consensus was easy to attain. Most people's lives were getting better (the economy was growing dramatically), and the world seemed simple (most world conflict was seen as a struggle between communism and freedom). Hence, the forces for cooperation predominated, and conflict, though present, was low-key. Still, certain underlying conflicts simmered. Black Americans remained disadvantaged, even if the promise of civil rights seemed to offer a better future. Women were becoming more educated, yet they were still expected to remain in the home if they could afford to do so, a situation that was to bring about great conflict and change in the future.

By the late 1960s, though, things had changed. America was in a war it did not understand and seemed unable to win. Many African Americans, their hopes buoyed by the prosperity of the 1950s and the idealism of the early 1960s, realized that their economic situation was not getting better. The antiwar and Black Power movements ended the appearance of consensus, and the conflict spread to other areas as well — as it usually does during periods of social change and upheaval. In particular, American women began to demand a more equal role in American society. None of this meant that the forces of cooperation were no longer operative. Despite the deep divisions, society did not collapse, the economy continued to produce, and many of the old rules that had been rejected were eventually replaced by new ones — different, indeed, but

still rules. Thus, just as the forces for conflict were present but subdued in the 1950s, the forces of cooperation remained present but were less evident in the 1960s.

From the mid-1970s through the 1980s, there was a more even balance between the forces of conflict and cooperation in American society than in either the 1950s or the 1960s. Social conflict, as represented in such events as riots and mass demonstrations, was less common during this period, but it did occasionally occur, as in the case of racial violence in Miami in 1980 and 1989. A conservative who extolled traditional societal values was twice elected president by big majorities — but massive opposition forced him to abandon certain policies, such as aid to the Nicaraguan contras. The excesses of the "free love" mentality of the 1960s had been soundly rejected by the end of the 1980s, but even AIDS could not bring about a return to the restrictive sexual values of the 1950s. Not surprisingly, U.S. sociology became theoretically balanced during this time. Functionalists reasserted the validity of their viewpoint, and a view that came to be known as *neofunctionalism* gained significant support among sociologists (Alexander, 1985, 1988). At the same time, however, a Section on Marxist Sociology was formed within the American Sociological Association, and its sessions were among the best attended at the annual meetings.

By the early 1990s, conflict seemed to be increasing again in American society. 1992 brought the bloodiest urban riot of the twentieth century, "alternative" styles of dress and music were enjoying a resurgence in popularity, and there were signs of renewed social activism among college students and other young people. It is not yet clear what course these trends will take or how sociology will respond to them. But they do remind us that the forces for both conflict and stability are always present in society, a point well recognized by sociology's most important theorists. These theorists have sought to understand the conditions under which each of these forces predominates. In fact, this tradition of balanced consideration of both kinds of forces can be traced at least to Max Weber, though some of Weber's theories are not easily classified as either functionalist or conflict. The views and contributions of Weber and two contemporary theorists — Gerhard Lenski and Lewis Coser — are further explored in the box entitled "Eclectic Macrosociology."

Macrosociological Perspectives: A Final Note

As we finish our discussion of macrosociological perspectives, we have seen important areas of consistency and overlap between functionalist and conflict thinking. We have seen, too, that social arrangements can be useful to society in some ways, but — at the same time — useful to

ECLECTIC MACROSOCIOLOGY

MAX WEBER (1864–1920)

No sociologist has had a greater influence on the field than the social theorist Max Weber (pronounced vā·ber). Weber's thinking drew on a variety of ideas, some associated with conflict theory, some with what we now call the functionalist perspective, and some with neither. Thus, he cannot be clearly linked to any particular perspective.

Like other sociologists of his time, Weber was greatly interested in the process of modernization associated with urbanization and the Industrial Revolution. A key element of modernization, according to Weber (1962), is rationalization — a process whereby decisions are made on the basis of what is effective in helping people attain their goals rather than on the basis of tradition. This notion is similar to functionalist theory in the sense that it focuses on what *works*. However, Weber was aware of conflicts and competing interests in society, and rationalization included the notion of what is effective for one group in its competition or conflict with another, a concept that borrows heavily from the conflict perspective.

GERHARD LENSKI (1924–)

The American sociologist Gerhard Lenski (1966) has drawn upon the functionalist and conflict theories to explain social inequality. He agrees with the functionalists — but only up to a point — that inequality creates incentives and rewards people in accordance with their skills. However, he also argues that much inequality exists beyond what can be accounted for on this basis, and that the power arising from wealth allows the advantaged to hang on to their wealth long after their advantage serves any use to society. Lenski also notes that the degree of inequality in any society is linked to its system of production. As societies advance from the hunting-and-gathering stage to agriculture (and, usually, some form of feudalism), the degree of social inequality increases dramatically. Once society industrializes, however, this trend is reversed. Although modern industrial societies have considerable inequality, they have less than preindustrial societies. The reasons for this include the complexity of the division of labor and the presence of a large skilled and educated segment that pushes society in the direction of democratization.

LEWIS COSER (1913–)

The American sociologist Lewis Coser has been interested in group dynamics, although he defines a group as everything from a small gathering to an entire social system. Much of his work has focused on ways that conflict — both within groups and between groups — can improve the functioning of those groups (Coser, 1956). Thus, it could be said that Coser has conducted a functional analysis of conflict. He argues that conflict within groups can benefit the group as long as it does not challenge the group's purpose for existence. He sees the normal state as a combination of consensus on core values and conflict over specifics. Conflict offers groups ways to adapt to changing needs and can also increase long-run group cohesion by offering a way to address dissatisfactions. Conflict in general is more likely to produce breakdown in small, close-knit groups, and adaptation in large, diverse ones. Conflict over many unrelated issues is also less disruptive than sustained conflict over one issue. Conflict between groups (external conflict) can perform the functions of defining group boundaries and promoting cohesion within groups.

special interests and perhaps even dysfunctional to society in other ways. Forces for conflict and forces for cooperation are both present in society, and each may dominate under different conditions. Moreover, as Coser notes, even conflict can in some ways be useful for the larger society. Finally, society is in part shaped by relationships of exchange that involve elements of both cooperation and domination. All of these things suggest that the most useful macrosociology may be one that incorporates ideas from both theoretical perspectives.
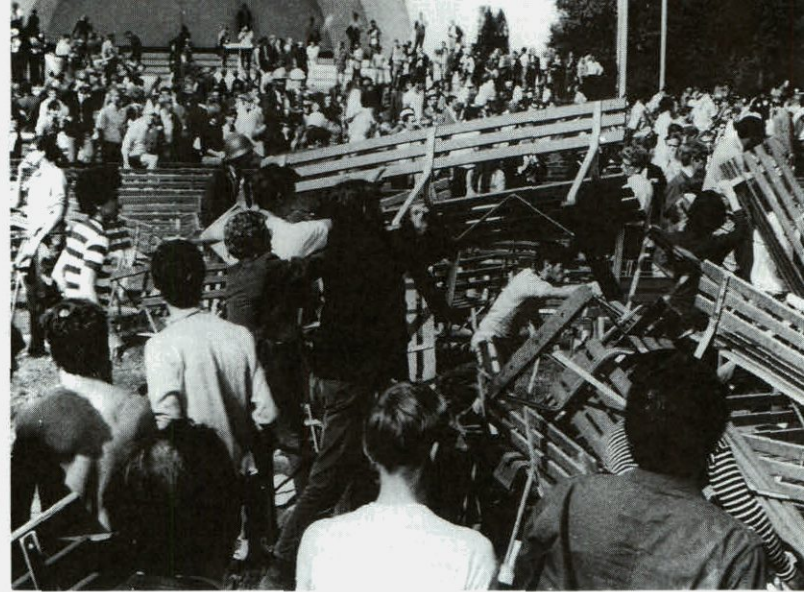
These photos contrast the supposedly "calm" 1950s with the "violent" 1960s. Although there is some truth to these descriptions, the 1950s did experience many underlying conflicts, and the forces of consensus held the nation together during the tumultuous 1960s.

Even so, the debate goes on between functionalist and conflict sociologists. This is not just a debate about theories; it is also a debate about values. Functionalism, because it notes society's tendencies toward stability and balance, appeals to conservatives and cautious liberals. It stresses the advantages of the status quo, which appeals to those who oppose major change. Its emphasis on conformity has a similar appeal, warning of the dangers of a divided society and opposing suggestions to do things in any radically different way.

Similarly, conflict theory appeals to radicals and strong liberals who favor fundamental changes in social institutions. It stresses society's inequalities, which liberals and radicals see as society's unfairnesses. It is favorable to new ideas and to social change, which appeals to those who think society needs to change.

Although political views may well influence sociologists' preferences for one perspective or the other, it is important to distinguish such views, which represent *values,* from what the two perspectives say about social reality, which is a matter of *theory.* One can never prove that a conservative, moderate, liberal, or radical political view is "right" or "wrong," because that is a matter of values. However, sociology has gone a long way toward understanding the forces that shape society, and the evidence here suggests that both the functionalist and the conflict perspectives have important insights to offer in this regard. Thus, it would be highly incorrect to say that these perspectives are "just a matter of opinion."

MICROSOCIOLOGY: THE SYMBOLIC-INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Almost from the time sociology emerged as an academic discipline, some people within the field felt that, to understand even large-scale patterns of human behavior, it was not enough to study only the characteristics of society. Rather, *these social theorists argued that you must study the processes by which human interaction occurs.* These processes of interaction involve social psychology or **microsociology**, in that they often include interactions *between individuals and the larger society.* Societies do present situations, send messages, and give rules to individuals, but it is on the individual level that these situations, messages, and rules are interpreted. Moreover, how these situations, messages, and rules are interpreted is a key factor in determining how people behave. These realizations have given rise to the third major perspective in sociology, the **symbolic-interactionist perspective**. Because of its concern with the interaction between the individual and the larger society, it is also sometimes called the *microinteractionist perspective* (Collins, 1985c), or simply the *interactionist perspective.*

The Interactionist Perspective Defined

If the interactionist perspective could be summarized in one general statement, that statement might begin with the

notion that the *interpretation* of reality can often be an important factor in *determining* the ultimate reality. As previously noted, society continually presents individuals with situations, messages, and rules. Taken together, these elements, and the *meaning* given to them by the individual, define the individual's experience of social reality. Sometimes the meaning of these situations, messages, and rules is clear, and to the extent that this is the case, the individual's social reality is obvious to him or her. Usually, however, the meaning of the situations, messages, and rules is not completely clear to the individual, and the individual must *interpret* them as best he or she can (Blumer, 1969a). This interpretation occurs, of course, in the context of past messages the individual has received from society. Nonetheless, it *is* interpretation, and individuals with different sets of past experiences frequently interpret the same message or situation differently. Hence, the individual's understanding of social reality depends in part on the content of the messages and situations he or she encounters and in part on how he or she interprets those messages and situations. How the individual understands reality, of course, will have an important effect on how he or she will behave, which can further alter the situation. For these reasons, *the interactionist perspective focuses first on how messages are sent and received and on how social situations are encountered by individuals, then upon how people interpret the meanings of these messages and situations, and finally on how these processes shape human behavior and society.*

Interpreting Situations and Messages

As noted above, one key concern of the interactionist perspective is how people interpret the messages they receive and the situations they encounter. Interactionists believe these issues are important because people's interpretations of reality are an important factor in determining how they will behave. Consider an example. You are waiting at the bus stop, and the person next to you says, "Hello. Isn't this a nice day?" Your behavior in response to this message will depend on your interpretation of the message, which in turn will be a product of past messages and experiences. If, for example, your experience has been that people at the bus stop like to chat to pass the time while waiting for the bus, you will probably respond in a friendly way and carry on a conversation with the person until the bus arrives. If, however, your experience has been different, you will probably respond differently. Suppose your experience has been that people at the bus stop usually don't talk to one another, but keep to themselves. On the few occasions when people did try to strike up a conversation with you, it turns out they were trying to sell you something, begging for money, or seeking to convert you to their religious beliefs. In this case, you would interpret the situation differently,

assume the person wanted something from you, and likely try to avoid further interaction.

The Social Construction of Reality

What is significant about the above example is that *the real intentions of the person speaking to you were not important.* Even the person's behavior does not give us the entire explanation of why you experienced the reality of the situation as you did. Rather, it was your understanding of the meaning of the person's behavior, including your interpretation of his or her intentions, that determined the reality that you experienced (Charon, 1989). Sociologists refer to this process as the **social construction of reality** (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). By this, they mean that the reality that you experience is not simply determined by what goes on in an objective sense; rather, it is determined by your understanding of the meaning of what happens. Thus, depending on that understanding, the reality you experienced could have been either "This person is friendly" or "This person is trying to hit me up for something."

There are two additional important points concerning this process. First, the meaning you attribute to the person's behavior is largely a product of your past experiences in similar social situations. Thus, there is a clear social influence on your interpretation of situations you encounter. Second, how you interpret the meaning of the situation you encounter will influence how you respond to it. This principle was recognized as early as the 1920s by W. I. Thomas, in a statement today known as the **Thomas theorem**: "If men (sic) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas, 1966). In other words, whatever the objective reality, people behave on the basis of their *understanding* of reality, and that behavior in turn shapes subsequent realities, including objective realities of human behavior. As Collins (1985a, p. 199) put it, "If the definition of reality can be shifted, the behavior it elicits will switch, sometimes drastically."

Ethnomethodology Symbolic-interactionist theory, then, argues that your interpretations of reality are in part socially determined, and that these interpretations in turn partly determine how you will behave. To put this a bit more broadly, human behavior is in part a product of the structure of society and in part a product of how individuals interpret that social structure. Attempting to understand the forces that influence how individuals interpret the situations and messages they encounter has developed into a major subfield within the interactionist perspective known as **ethnomethodology**. It was given this name by Harold Garfinkel, who has written extensively about it (see Garfinkel, 1967; and Handel, 1982). Ethnomethodology has been applied to a variety of topics in sociology. It has been sug-

gested, for example, that one factor influencing people's scores on intelligence tests is their interpretation of the meaning and importance of the test and what it will be used for (Ogbu, 1978).

The Looking-Glass Self   Another important concept that has long been used by symbolic-interactionists is the **looking-glass self**. This concept was developed by the early symbolic-interactionist theorist Charles Horton Cooley, who is discussed further in the box entitled "Symbolic-Interactionist Theory." The basic notion of the looking-glass self could be summed up as "We see ourselves as others see us." In other words, we come to develop a self-image on the basis of the messages we get from others, as we understand them. If your teachers and fellow students give you the message, in various ways, that you are "smart," you will come to think of yourself as an intelligent person. If others tell you that you are attractive, you will likely think of yourself as attractive. Conversely, if people repeatedly laugh at you and tease you about being clumsy, you will probably come to decide that you are clumsy. Over the years, you gradually develop a complex set of ideas about what kind of person you are, and to a large extent, these ideas are based on the messages you get from others (Matsueda, 1992). In Cooley's terms, you use other people as a mirror into which you look to see what you are like.

Of course, the message we get from others about ourselves is partly a product of the intended content of the message and partly a product of how we *perceive* the mes-

The basic notion of the looking-glass self can be summed up as "We see ourselves as others see us." If others tell you that you are attractive, you will likely think of yourself as attractive, because you use other people as a mirror into which you look to see what you are like.
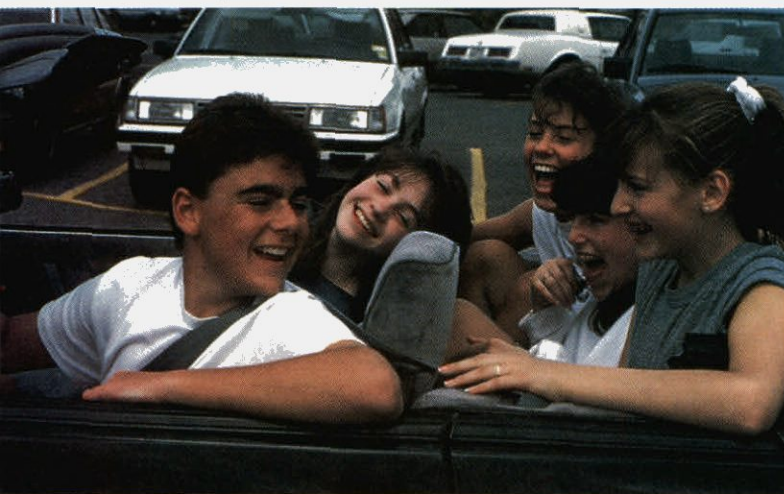
sage. To Cooley, an important part of the looking-glass self was how we understand the messages we get from others. In Cooley's terms, we *imagine* what others think of us on the basis of our understanding of the messages we get from them. Thus, if we misunderstand the messages of others, we may form our self-image on the basis of a different message than what was intended. For this reason, processes of communication — the sending and receiving of messages about our personal characteristics — play a key role in the formation of self-image.

The kind of self-image this process produces, moreover, will influence many aspects of your life. Self-esteem, clearly part of this process, has been shown to be linked to success in business life and in personal life, and the lack of it has been linked to substance abuse, unemployment, suicide, and a host of other personal and social problems.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy   A concept closely related to the looking-glass self, but applicable to an even broader range of human behavior, is the **self-fulfilling prophecy**. The self-fulfilling prophecy is a situation in which people *expect* something to happen, and because they expect it to happen, they behave in such a way that they cause it to happen. Sociologists have discovered numerous examples of self-fulfilling prophecies. The best known concerns *teacher expectations* and *student achievement* (Brophy, 1983; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). Generally speaking, students will outperform others of equal ability when teachers have higher expectations of them. (For a more detailed discussion, see Chapter 14.) Similarly, countries sometimes engage in military buildups because they expect to be attacked, which their potential enemies interpret as an aggressive move that requires a response. A cycle of this type between two polarized alliances in Europe was one of the causes of World War I (Farrar, 1978). Another example concerns the often poor relations between inner-city black and Hispanic youths and the police. The police view the youths as troublemakers who must be shown the "force of the law." The youths see the police as brutal and often racist, and they frequently respond with behavior to show them that "Nobody's going to push us around." In other words, both the police and the youth "act tough" toward each other because each expects trouble from the other. These responses virtually ensure conflict between the two groups (Kuykendall, 1970).

Social Roles

An important concept in symbolic-interactionist sociology is the notion of **social roles**: *sets of expectations about how people are supposed to behave*, which are attached to positions within the social system. Human interaction is defined by the relationships among various roles, such as

SYMBOLIC-INTERACTIONIST THEORY

CHARLES HORTON COOLEY (1864–1929)

Much of what later came to be known as the symbolic-interactionist perspective is based on the ideas of Charles Horton Cooley. Cooley is best known for his theories concerning self-image and the looking-glass self, which are discussed in this chapter. Cooley also proposed that the formation of self-image occurs mainly through communication with a fairly limited number of individuals, called *significant others*, with whom a person interacts on a regular basis. In childhood, parents, peers, teachers, relatives, neighbors, and religious leaders are most likely to be the significant others. In later life, co-workers, supervisors, spouses or lovers, and children are the most important significant others.

GEORGE HERBERT MEAD (1863–1931)

George Herbert Mead's thinking was similar in many ways to that of Cooley, but he added two important elements to Cooley's theories. First, he clarified the means by which the communication processes of interest to Cooley occurred. Mead (1934) pointed out that one of the features that distinguishes human beings from animals is their ability to use *symbols*. A symbol can be defined as anything that stands for or represents something else. This includes words, gestures, signs, and images. Most human communication uses symbols, and it is through symbols that the processes of interest to symbolic-interactionists occur. Symbols are used to communicate the expectations associated with roles, and, in response, they are used to present the image to others that an individual is attempting to fulfill the expectations of those roles. Finally, symbols are used by others to let the individual know how well or poorly he or she is doing in meeting those role expectations.

Mead's other important addition to Cooley's thinking was the concept of the *generalized other*.

HERBERT BLUMER (1900–1987)

Herbert Blumer was one of Mead's many students in his famous social psychology course, which formed the basis of *Mind, Self, and Society* (Mead, 1934). Blumer went on to become the most influential symbolic-interactionist theorist of recent years, although he also made important contributions to macrosociological analysis, particularly in the area of race relations (for example, Blumer, 1965).

It was Blumer who first used the term *symbolic-interactionism* in a 1937 article. According to Blumer (1969), symbolic-interactionism is based on three key premises. The first is that human beings behave toward things on the basis of the meaning that those things have for them. The second is that the meanings of things for each individual are derived from social interaction with other people. This premise challenged two dominant views in the social sciences: the belief that the meaning of things is a matter of objective reality and the conviction that the meaning of things a person observes is a product of the person's psychological makeup. Blumer's third key premise is that meanings are shaped through an interpretive process used by the individual in dealing with the things he or she encounters. Thus, the actions of others are interpreted, and this interpretation is part of what defines meaning. Moreover, because of this process of interpretation, meanings of things can change as the interpretation changes.

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student, teacher, parent, and school bus driver. Each day, everyone fills a variety of roles such as these, and each role carries a set of expectations about how people are supposed to behave in various situations. The exact content of these roles depends on the nature of the particular social system.

Moreover, knowledge of how to behave in roles is learned through contact with others and through the messages we receive from others about (1) what expectations are attached to a particular role and (2) how well we are meeting the expectations associated with the roles we fill. The latter

This teacher is obviously deeply engaged with her students. She probably sees this as part of her role as teacher, and she is making it easier for her students to live up to her expectations of them.

process, of course, is part of what Cooley meant by the looking-glass self.

A related concern of symbolic-interactionists has been with how people learn the relationships among various roles in the social system, such as that of teachers and students. As with learning the content of roles, this occurs largely through the messages people receive from others, as well as through observation. These learning processes have a large impact on how people behave: People usually try to behave in ways that fulfill the expectations of their roles as they understand them, and that interact in the expected way with other roles. As discussed in the box entitled "Symbolic-Interactionist Theory," the contributions of George Herbert Mead have been particularly important in this area. Symbolic-interactionists have been particularly interested in the childhood socialization process, because the learning of social roles is such a critical part of that process.

Sending Messages: The Presentation of Self

Just as the symbolic-interactionist perspective is concerned with how people get and interpret social messages, it is also concerned with how messages are sent. In particular, people want to convince others that they are succeeding in meeting the expectations of the roles they are attempting to fill. Thus, just as people respond to the expectations and messages they get from others, they also attempt to send messages regarding their own behavior and characteristics. To any given individual, the importance of different roles will vary. In addition, people exercise some choice in the roles they fill. Most of us, for example, must fill the role of "employee" in some way or other. However, the particular

jobs we hold — and thus the particular characteristics of our employment role — vary widely. Moreover, roles are typically something over which people have some choice. In part, people manage the self-image that they project to *others by choosing what roles to fill* and emphasize in their lives (see Backman and Secord, 1968; Kemper and Collins, 1990). They also manage their self-image by presenting to other people the image that they feel is appropriate to the particular role that they are in at any particular time. The early Chicago School sociologist Robert Park (1927) put it this way: "One thing that distinguishes man from the lower animals is the fact that he has a conception of himself, and once he has defined his role, *he tries to live up to it.* He not only acts, but he dresses the part, assumes quite spontaneously all the manners and attitudes he conceives as proper to it." Sociologists refer to this process as the *presentation of self,* or *impression management.*

The Dramaturgical Perspective   The analogy of human behavior to acting is made most explicitly by a particular interactionist theory known as the **dramaturgical perspective.** This theory, generally identified with Erving Goffman (1959, 1967, 1971), argues that in each role we fill, we try to convince people that we are filling it in a particular way, generally the way to which we think they will respond positively. Thus, the self-image a person attempts to project at work will be different, for example, from the impression *he or she would likely try to project* on a weekend "singles" ski excursion. In Goffman's terms, people give different performances on different occasions. These performances, however, are always shaped by what people think others expect and will respond to positively. Thus, it is only through messages from others that we develop our ideas of what is a proper image to project at work or on a ski trip.

FRONT-STAGE AND BACK-STAGE BEHAVIOR An important distinction in the dramaturgical approach is that of "front-stage" and "back-stage" behavior (Goffman, 1959). "Front-stage" behavior—the performances aimed at impression management—takes place in settings where others can see us. However, there are also private settings in which we "let our guard down" and behave in ways that we would not want others to see. Goffman called this "back-stage" behavior. Collins (1985c, p. 157) illustrated the distinction this way:

> [Front stage] is the storefront where the salesperson hustles the customer, [back stage] the backroom where the employees divide up their sales territories, establish their sales line, and let their hair down after the manipulation they have gone through. In another sphere, there is an analogous distinction between the cleaned-up living room and a carefully laid table where the ritual of a dinner party is to reaffirm status membership with one's guests, and the backstage of bathroom, kitchen, and bedroom before and afterwards, where emotional as well as physical garbage is disposed of.

A fascinating aspect of the process of impression management is that we generally assist one another with our performances (Goffman, 1959). Most of us are sufficiently insecure about our own performances that we do not make others aware of the flaws in theirs. Imagine, for example, that your professor or a classmate enters your classroom with his zipper open or her blouse unbuttoned. There may be a bit of snickering, but most people will try to spare the person involved embarrassment by pretending nothing is wrong. In fact, some people will experience discomfort or embarrassment over the situation, even though it is someone else whose performance is flawed. This embarrassment or discomfort will probably increase if anyone says anything about it in front of the class. Many people will think "That could just as easily be me." Therefore, people usually engage in what Goffman called "studied nonobservance": They go out of their way to ignore flaws in others' performances. To create or even acknowledge awareness of flaws in performances is to "create a scene": It leads to embarrassment, not only for the person whose performance is flawed, but for others as well.

The dramaturgical perspective has sometimes been criticized for attempting to reduce human behavior to a continuous process of impression management. To do this would clearly be an oversimplification, for two reasons. First, as macrosociology tells us, a person's position in the larger social structure clearly is an important force in shaping behavior. By position in the social structure, I am referring to the functions a person's roles must fill (as stressed by the functionalist perspective) and the resources attached to

A cocktail party or similar social occasion always seems to call for a special presentation of self and a heightened concern with impression management.

those roles (as stressed by the conflict perspective). Second, whatever self-image we try to project to others, we are likely to influence our own self-image in the attempt. In other words, if we "act" to impress others, we will often come to believe our own act. This will be particularly true if *others* respond positively to the act. In other words, the messages from others are once again affecting our own self-images.

MICRO- AND MACROSOCIOLOGY: IS SYNTHESIS POSSIBLE?

Simultaneous Effects of Function, Conflict, and Interaction

As we saw earlier, there has been considerable effort among sociologists to combine the insights of the functionalist and conflict perspectives in order to understand social situations more fully. Is it similarly possible to combine the microsociological interactionist perspective with the two macrosociological perspectives? Increasingly, sociologists like George Homans and Randall Collins (see box) have been attempting to do exactly this. It is my view that most social situations can be more fully understood by using all three perspectives (or theories that combine them) rather than by using just one or two. I shall briefly outline the reasons why I think this is so, discuss some examples of theories combining the perspectives, and then give a concrete example of a common social situation that is best understood by using all three perspectives.

MICRO-MACRO LINKS

GEORGE C. HOMANS (1910–1989)

The American sociologist George Homans (1961) has been one of the leading advocates in sociology of *exchange theory,* discussed in the text. He argues that in any human exchange, the objective is to maximize profit, which he defines broadly as reward minus cost. Because people bring unequal resources into such exchanges, they often expect and receive unequal profits.

Homans (1950) has also devoted a good deal of effort to studying group dynamics. He believes that human interaction within groups is shaped by an *external system* and an *internal system.* The external system refers to the interactions of the group with its larger environment, including other groups: an environment to which the group must adapt if it is to survive. The internal system refers to the interactions of individuals and coalitions within the group, which define group sentiment and lead to the development of a group culture. These processes involve elements of both cooperation and conflict.

RANDALL COLLINS (1941–)

Randall Collins has been one of the most prolific writers among sociological theorists in the 1970s and 1980s. His early work centered around the conflict perspective, addressing a wide range of issues relating to that perspective. In *Conflict Sociology* (1975), he discusses ways in which the propositions arising from conflict theory (and other sociological theories as well) can be scientifically tested, and he assesses the contribution of the conflict perspective to the understanding of several areas of social life. He has applied the conflict perspective to religion (1975), marriage (1985b), gender inequality (1971a), and education (1971b).

Recently, however, Collins has sought to combine insights from the conflict perspective with those from microsociology. Like other sociologists in recent years, he stresses the idea that individual actions shape social structures. His interaction ritual chain theory, discussed in the text, is one example of this thrust. He has also devoted some effort to understanding the intellectual roots of the three main sociological perspectives, noting, among other things, that several philosophical viewpoints that were prominent in the early days of sociology have influenced all three perspectives (Collins, 1985a). Thus, from the very start, the three sociological traditions have had at least something in common.

Although most sociologists operate primarily as either macrosociologists or microsociologists, I believe that there is one sense in which few would dispute the usefulness of both types of approach. To put it simply, the different approaches may be useful for understanding different aspects of the social situation. Any social arrangement may *exist in* part because it is useful to the society—as argued by the functionalist perspective. At the same time, it may also exist partly because it meets the needs of some particular interest group within the society—as argued by the conflict perspective. It may, in fact, even be harmful to other interest groups or, in some way, to the larger society. Despite these larger societal influences, though, the exact form of the social arrangement is likely to be shaped by the understandings of reality held by those participating in it, and by their consequent behavior—which is what the symbolic-interactionist view argues. These understandings are partly a product of the objective reality of the larger social structure, but they are also partly a product of people's response *to that reality* (Handel, 1979, pp. 863–867).

Attempts at Synthesis Sociology has witnessed many recent attempts to establish links between micro and macro social influences. One example is Giddens's (1978, 1984, 1985) *structuration theory.* Giddens criticizes both functionalism and conflict theory for viewing social structure as an unchanging force that shapes the individual. Though structure does influence the individual, Giddens points out

that individuals can and do shape structures. Structures provide people with knowledge and capabilities, which they then use to either change or reproduce the structure. If individuals act in innovative ways, their actions can change the social structure (Sewell, 1992). Such actions might include invention of a new technology, or the organization or leadership of a social movement. Similar ideas can be seen in Randall Collins's (1981, 1988) *interaction ritual chain theory*. Interaction rituals are encounters in which individuals exchange performances of the type described in Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, discussed on pp. 66–67. Each of these interaction rituals defines a relationship, the nature of which is determined by the knowledge, skills, ideas, and ways of thinking of the people involved. In each such ritual, there is an exchange of these cultural resources between the participants. These exchanges may increase or decrease the cultural resources of each participant. Ultimately, they may either perpetuate or break down social inequality, depending on who gains and who loses resources in these exchanges.

Most recently, Kemper and Collins (1990) have argued that both macro, society-level interactions (for example, between interest groups, organizations, or countries) and individual, one-to-one relationships are shaped by the same two dimensions. One is a power dimension, characterized by being able to make others behave as you want them to; the other is what Kemper and Collins call a status dimension, characterized by voluntarily conferring status, as through expressions of friendship and warmth; gifts; social recognition; and liking, love, or trust. Further, they argue that the outcomes of processes involving these dimensions at the societal level affect people's interactions at the individual level, and vice versa.

Both micro and macro perspectives study the mechanisms by which social inequality is maintained or broken down. Conflict theorists, for example, argue that social inequality largely reflects unequal access to education and to the kinds of cultural resources of interest to Collins. They contend that the educational system makes it difficult or impossible for people of lower socioeconomic status to gain educational credentials, knowledge, or cultural capital. When sociologists ask *how* the educational system may perpetuate such inequalities, however, they usually focus on microsociological processes, such as the effect of teacher expectations on student achievement. Thus, the *outcome* may be structured inequality, as argued by conflict theory, but to understand the *process* that leads to that outcome, we must use interactionist theory.

Exchange Theory

One important theory that represents a linkage between macro- and microsociology is **exchange theory** (Blau,

As long as it meets both partners' needs, it doesn't matter who takes care of the house and who goes to the office — but if needs are not being met, the marriage could be in trouble.

1964; Homans, 1961, 1984; for examples of recent work in this tradition, see Clark, 1987; Mortensen, 1988; Molm, 1991; Uhara, 1990; Yamagishi, Gilmore, and Cook, 1988). Exchange theory, like conflict theory, begins with the assumption that people seek to advance their self-interests. These interests sometimes conflict and sometimes coincide with those of other people. According to this theory, people enter into relationships with one another when each participant has something to offer that the other desires. Thus, each person has something to give and something to gain. Exchange theory has been applied to a wide range of relationships, from pure business relationships such as that between buyer and seller to intimate personal relationships such as that between husband and wife. In the latter case, for example, consider the personal needs of two individuals who get married. One partner may primarily have a need for companionship, whereas the other seeks status through the marriage relationship. According to Blau, people assess their needs and pick their partners accordingly, and, as long as these needs stay the same and each partner meets the other's need, the relationship is likely to remain stable. Of course, should either partner's needs change, or should one partner stop meeting the other's needs, the marriage could be in trouble.

Exchange relationships also can operate between groups and individuals. Consider the case of an individual joining a club. The club gains increased membership, dues

A yard sale, like most social realities, can be analyzed from the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives.

money, and possibly someone new to work on its projects. The individual gains the personal interaction the club provides, as well as whatever activities and programs it offers members. However, if the relationship does not prove to be mutually beneficial, it will likely end.

Exchanges and Power   Ideally, social exchanges are equal. Each partner in the exchange gets a fair "return" for what he or she puts in. Many business and personal relationships in our society are governed by a norm of *reciprocity*—the view that a fair exchange is one in which there is a more-or-less even trade. Similarly, studies of attractiveness show that, in the majority of cases, partners in love relationships rate fairly similarly to one another on attractiveness (Berscheid et al., 1971; Penrod, 1986, pp. 189–190; Walster and Walster, 1969). Thus, attractiveness operates as a resource for which partners in courtship make an "even" trade. Sometimes, however, people accept a lower level of attractiveness in their mate in order to get more of something else, such as money or prestige.

Exchange theorists also note that many exchange relationships are characterized by *unequal power*, in which one partner sometimes brings greater resources to the exchange than the other, as in the case of the relationship between employer and employee. When this happens, the more powerful partner usually expects and gets more (Molm, 1990). Those who lack resources—the poor, the sick, the unattractive—may have little choice but to enter relationships of unequal exchange. This concept also explains one reason why women have traditionally been more concerned about appearance than men: In a sexist society, they have had fewer alternative resources like wealth and power to offer to a potential mate. Thus, although exchange

theory resembles functionalism in the sense that each partner often benefits from the exchange, it resembles conflict theory in the sense that one partner can benefit much more than the other. Although it resembles the macro theories in some regards, its focus is on the actions of individuals (Alexander, 1988, p. 87), which arise largely from their perceptions about what they have to gain or lose in a relationship.

Although exchange theory has been influential in both macrosociology and social psychology and acts as something of a bridge between the two, it has its critics. The strongest criticism is that it reduces all human interactions to calculated, rational exchanges. The critics argue that in reality people enter into social relationships for all kinds of reasons—some rational, some based heavily on emotion. A more balanced view, then, might be that people enter into relationships with one another partly for reasons of exchange and partly for other reasons.

We have seen, then, that there are some cases in which ideas arising from two or all three of the sociological perspectives are combined, as in exchange theory, and other cases in which different perspectives make competing claims. Through the cycle of theory and research discussed in Chapter 2, claims arising from each perspective are put to the test: Some are supported by research findings; others are not. Let us now consider an everyday example where the three perspectives combined can give us insights that go beyond those of any perspective by itself.

Using All Three Perspectives: An Example

Every Saturday morning from late spring through early fall, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of Americans participate in an event that takes place in big cities and small towns, in rural areas and suburbs, in all 50 states. I am speaking of the yard sale or garage sale. This is an ordinary event, not the stuff of which headline news or path-breaking sociological studies are made. Nonetheless, it is important to millions of Americans. Moreover, I would argue that it is precisely for the ordinary, everyday event like the yard sale that sociology is useful for giving us special insights. Hence, I choose the yard sale, not only as an event about which sociology offers interesting insights, but also as one that illustrates the usefulness of each of the three perspectives for letting us see a part of the social reality that is occurring.

Consider how a yard sale might be analyzed from the functionalist perspective. A yard sale performs the important function of allowing things that would otherwise go to waste to be used and, for the seller, to be turned into a little extra cash. These are the functions of a yard sale that readily come to mind—in other words, its *manifest functions*.

Consider, though, some *latent functions* of yard sales. For one, they offer people an enjoyable outing, an opportunity to get out of the house. In addition, they may perform the important social function of enabling people to see one another on a regular basis.

Yard sales also can be analyzed from a conflict perspective. In fact, I first became aware of this when I saw an article about yard sales in an "underground newsletter" published by a group of politically radical students on the campus where I teach. The article touted yard sales as "striking a blow at capitalism through people's recycling." In a sense, it was right. Those who attend yard sales can be seen as an interest group; specifically, *people* with limited incomes who have a particular interest in getting things inexpensively rather than purchasing "flashy and new" merchandise. Surely this interest runs contrary to that of another set of interest groups: the manufacturers, advertisers, and department stores, whose interests lie in persuading people to buy the "newest and best," even if something older and less flashy would work equally well. Thus, shopping at yard sales could be seen as being in the interest of those with limited incomes, and there is evidence suggesting that this is happening. In the past decade or two, as people's purchasing power has failed to grow as it did in the past, the popularity of yard sales has soared. Some evidence does indicate that the established business interests have come to see yard sales as a threat. In my town, for example, several city council members have called for a crackdown on the posting of signs advertising yard sales, proclaiming them to be an unsightly nuisance. (Interestingly, no similar argument had been made by the city council a few months earlier when the town was flooded with political campaign signs!)

Finally, yard sales can be analyzed from a symbolic-interactionist perspective. They are often characterized by considerable bargaining between buyer and seller, and the course of this bargaining is certainly shaped by the perceptions the buyer and seller have of each other. If the seller is perceived as "wanting too much," the entire interaction can come to a quick end. Evidence of "wanting too much" can include not only prices that are too high, but also an unwillingness to bargain. As symbolic-interactionists point out, it is the person's perception of the meaning of the other's behavior *that is critical*. In other words, the reality that each of us experiences is socially constructed. It may be that the seller is having his or her first yard sale and doesn't know what prices to charge or that one is supposed to bargain. That doesn't really matter to the buyer, though, because it is the buyer's *perception* that determines his or her behavior. If the buyer misinterprets the seller's lack of experience as greed, the buyer experiences the seller as "wanting too much" rather than not knowing you're supposed to bargain. With this understanding of reality, the buyer will likely end the interaction.

Of course, the seller's behavior is also influenced by the process of interaction. A novice seller may realize, after a few such interactions, that something is wrong. If the disgruntled buyers give the seller the right set of messages, the seller may learn from them that buyers expect the prices to be lower and to be subject to bargaining. Once the seller lowers his or her prices and begins to bargain, the entire interaction may be different. In short, the communication that occurs between buyer and seller, as well as how each interprets the other's messages, has a crucial impact on the outcomes of the yard sale. To put it in Blumer's terminology, behavior has been influenced by the meanings of the yard sale situation to the participants, which in turn is largely a product *of their* communication with one another.

We have seen, then, that each perspective—functionalist, conflict, and interactionist—has added something to our understanding of the yard sale. Each has helped us understand a somewhat different part of its reality. In this particular case, none of the three perspectives is in any sense "wrong," even though proponents of the three perspectives can and do debate their relative usefulness for understanding reality. Rather, as noted, each helps us understand a slightly different aspect of what is taking place. Most important, our understanding of the social meaning and significance of the yard sale is greater when we use all three perspectives than when we use any one, because each offers us part of the "big picture."

The Three Perspectives and This Book

I have provided an extensive introduction to the three sociological perspectives in this chapter because I believe that they give greater meaning to the more specific theorizing and research that will be discussed in the remainder of this book. The rest of the book will concern a number of major topics that make up the key subject matter of sociology. Each of these topics has a number of specific theories and lines of research pertaining to it. Many of these theories and lines of research, though specific to the topic of interest, arise in large part from one of the three perspectives introduced here. Some go further and attempt to combine insights from two or all three of the perspectives and to apply them to a particular topic. I believe that your understanding of sociology will be enhanced if you see how a theory about, for example, race relations, may relate to theories about aging, or drug use, or formal organizations. The best way to do this is to try throughout the book to link specific theories to the larger sociological perspectives from which they arise. Thus, in virtually every chapter in this book, that linkage will be made. As you read this text, I hope you will see that at least one of the major perspectives, and often all three, can be used to gain important insights about every major topic discussed in the rest of this book.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have examined the three theoretical perspectives that have had the greatest influence in sociology. Two of them, the functionalist and conflict perspectives, are macrosociological, focusing mainly on large-scale societal processes. The functionalist perspective holds that social arrangements exist because they meet needs in society, and it stresses interdependency, the functions of social structure and culture, consensus, cooperation, and equilibrium. The conflict perspective holds that society is made up of competing interest groups with unequal power and that social structure exists because it meets the needs of interest groups, usually those with power. It stresses conflicting interests, the relationship of culture and social structure to group interests, and the inevitability of conflict and change.

In part, these perspectives reflect competing values that cannot be judged scientifically. In larger part, though, they reflect different theories about human behavior and society, which are subject to scientific evaluation. Although the two macrosociological perspectives disagree on some key points, many sociologists believe that the two schools are not incompatible. Social structure, for example, may meet society's needs in some ways and the needs of dominant groups in other ways. Similarly, it is reasonable to argue that forces for both stability and change are always present in society, but that under different social conditions, different forces predominate.

The microsociological symbolic-interactionist perspective gives greater attention to processes involving individuals. It holds that people's understanding of reality is determined by the messages they get from others and by how they interpret these messages. This, in turn, is an important influence over how people behave. Among key concepts stressed by interactionists are social roles, the looking-glass self, the self-fulfilling prophecy, and the social construction of reality.

Attempts have been made to build links between micro- and macrosociology. As illustrated by the example of the yard sale, each perspective — the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist — can add to our understanding of a social situation. In large part, this is true because each addresses a different piece of the reality of that situation.

GLOSSARY

perspective A general approach to a subject, including a set of questions to be addressed, a theoretical framework, and, often, a set of values.

macrosociology Those areas of sociology that are concerned with large-scale patterns operating at the level of the group or society.

functionalist perspective A macrosociological perspective stressing the basic notion that society is made up of interdependent parts that function together to produce consensus and stability.

function A consequence of a social arrangement that is in some way useful for the social system.

manifest function A function of a social arrangement that is evident and, often, intended.

latent function A function of a social arrangement that is not evident and is often unintended.

dysfunction A consequence of a social arrangement that is in some way damaging or problematic to the social system.

conflict perspective A macrosociological perspective based on the key premise that society is made up of groups that compete, usually with unequal power, for scarce re-

sources; conflict and change are seen as the natural order of things.

scarce resources Material goods, statuses, and other things that people want, but that do not exist in sufficient quantities to satisfy everybody's needs or desires.

status quo The existing set of arrangements within a society.

institutionalization A process whereby a condition or social arrangement becomes accepted as a normal and necessary part of a society.

microsociology An area of sociology that is concerned with the interaction of the individual with larger societal influences.

symbolic-interactionist perspective A major microsociological perspective stressing the importance of messages from others and from society, how people understand and interpret these messages, and how this process affects people's behaviors.

social construction of reality A process in which people's experience of reality is largely determined by the meanings they attach to that reality.

Thomas theorem A sociological principle that states that situations defined by people as real are real in their consequences.

ethnomethodology A theory arising from the symbolic-interactionist perspective that argues that human behavior is a product of how people understand the situations they encounter.

looking-glass self A self-image based on an individual's understanding of messages from others about what kind of person that individual is.

self-fulfilling prophecy A process in which people's belief that a certain event will occur leads them to behave in such a way that they cause the event to happen.

social role A set of behavioral expectations that are attached to a social position or status.

dramaturgical perspective A theory arising from the symbolic-interactionist perspective that holds that human behavior is often an attempt to present a particular self-image to others.

exchange theory A theory holding that people enter a relationship because each participant expects to gain something from it.

FURTHER READING

CHARON, JOEL. 1989. *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction, an Interpretation, an Integration*, 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. A highly readable introduction to the symbolic-interactionist perspective. It also includes a useful discussion of what is meant by a perspective.

COLLINS, RANDALL. 1985. *Three Sociological Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press. An excellent discussion of major sociological theoreticians, which locates each major theorist in terms of the three major perspectives, explores the intellectual origins of each perspective, and examines the possibilities of combining ideas arising from each perspective for a better understanding of human society.

COLLINS, RANDALL. 1975. *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science*. New York: Academic Press. A bit more technical than Collins's 1985 book described above, this book offers a thorough assessment of the contribution of the conflict perspective to our understanding of human society. It also includes some valuable insights about the nature of scientific inquiry in sociology.

GIDDENS, ANTHONY. 1986. *Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. An examination of the role sociology has to play in society—and of some major theoretical viewpoints in sociology—by a theorist who has taken a leading role in attempts to combine insights from microsociology and macrosociology.

MERTON, ROBERT. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 2nd ed. New York: Free Press. Discusses Merton's midlevel variety of functionalist theory, applied to a wide variety of issues of interest to sociologists.

WALLACE, RUTH A., AND ALISON WOLF. 1991. *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Continuing the Classical Tradition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. A comprehensive source that discusses the major perspectives of modern sociological theory: functionalism, conflict theory, theories of rational choice, symbolic-interactionism, and phenomenology. Also provided is an overview of recent theoretical developments.