

networks

There's More Online!

- ✓ **CARTOON** The Power of Symbols
- ✓ **CHART** Five Key Concepts
- ✓ **CHART** Theoretical Perspectives: Assumptions of the Major Perspectives
- ✓ **IMAGE** Yesteryear's Family
- ✓ **MAP** A Different Perspective
- ✓ **SELF-CHECK QUIZ**



LESSON 3 Theoretical Perspectives

ESSENTIAL QUESTION • *What is sociology?*

Reading HELPDESK



Academic Vocabulary

- symbol
- abstract

Content Vocabulary

- theoretical perspective
- functionalism
- manifest functions
- latent functions
- dysfunction
- conflict perspective
- power
- symbolic interactionism
- dramaturgy

TAKING NOTES:

Key Ideas and Details

LISTING As you read about the theoretical perspectives, use a graphic organizer like the one below to list the main assumptions or characteristics of each approach.

Functionalism	Conflict	Symbolic Interactionism
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Sociology includes three major theoretical perspectives. Functionalism views society as an integrated whole. Conflict theory looks at class, race, and gender struggles. Symbolic interactionism examines how group members interact.

The Role of Theoretical Perspectives

GUIDING QUESTION *What is a theoretical perspective?*

Perception is the way the brain interprets an image or event. Similarly, your perspective is the way you interpret the meaning of an image or event. Your perspective is influenced by the beliefs or values you hold. It draws your attention to some things and blinds you to others. One perspective emphasizes certain aspects of an event, while another perspective accents different aspects of the same event. When a perspective highlights certain parts, it necessarily places other parts in the background.

Theoretical Perspectives

A **theoretical perspective** is a set of assumptions about an area of study. In the case of sociology, it is a set of assumptions about the workings of society. Supporters of a theoretical perspective consider it true and use it to organize their research.

But competing, even conflicting, theories usually exist at the same time. Conflicting theories can arise for many reasons. Perhaps not enough evidence exists to determine which theory is accurate, or different theories may explain different aspects of the problem.

This is even true in the so-called hard sciences such as modern physics. Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity, for example, contradicts the widely accepted Big Bang theory of the origin of the physical universe. Einstein himself never accepted quantum theory—the theory about the relationship between matter and energy at the subatomic level. Nonetheless, quantum theory has become the foundation of modern developments in such fields as chemistry and molecular biology. Today theories are being put forth that hold promise for combining relativity and quantum theory.

If theories still compete in physics and the other natural sciences, it should not be surprising that several major theoretical perspectives exist in sociology. The three theoretical perspectives most widely used by sociologists are *functionalism*, *conflict theory*, and *symbolic interactionism*. Each of these perspectives provides a different slant on human social behavior. The exclusive use of any one of these theoretical perspectives prevents our seeing other aspects of social behavior. All three perspectives together, however, allow us to see most of the important dimensions of human social behavior.

theoretical perspective
a set of assumptions about an area of study accepted as true

Five Key Concepts of Sociology

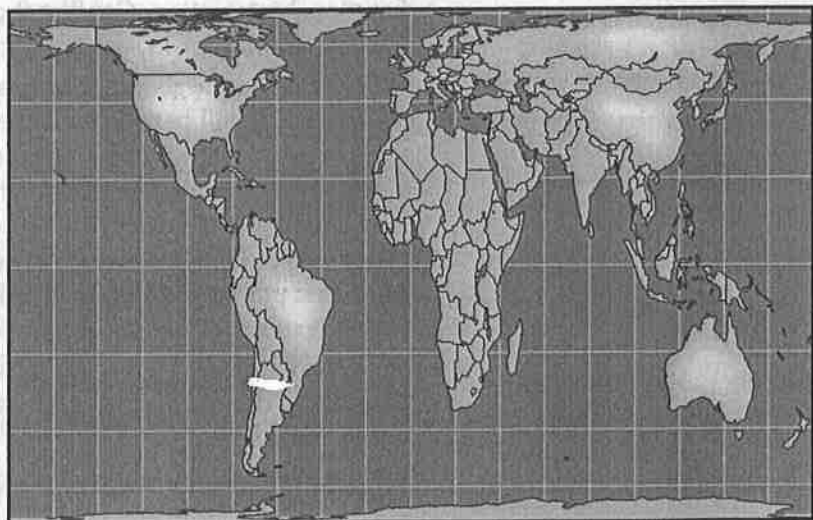
The three major theoretical perspectives have some basic building blocks in common. These building blocks include the five key concepts in sociology: *functional integration*, *social structure*, *power*, *social action*, and *culture*. These concepts help sociologists look beyond individual personalities and events to analyze society. While the concepts are expressed in common words, they have specific meanings in the field of sociology, meanings which will become more comprehensible as you proceed through the textbook. Different concepts are emphasized within different theoretical perspectives.

- *Functional integration* refers to the interdependence among the parts in a social system. Each part has contributions that it must make for the whole system to function well. This concept is central to functionalism, which sees integration as an essential condition for the proper functioning of society.
- *Social structure* refers to the pattern of social behavior in a group or society. It acts as a framework for society by establishing the ways that people and groups are related. These relationships are based on a person's location, or status, in the social structure. Unlike the structure of a building, social structure cannot be seen.

A Global Perspective

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Look at this map showing the Peters Projection, an area-accurate map. Does it look like the world maps with which you are familiar? What is different? All mapmakers face the same problem: The world is round; maps are flat. Thus all maps distort the shape of Earth in some way. So it is with any perspective. When studying sociology, you will be asked to abandon the conventional perspective in favor of the sociological perspective.



Geography Connection

1. **Places and Regions** What does your reaction to this map tell you about power of the perspective you bring to a situation?
2. **The World in Spatial Terms** Look at several different world maps. What is the size of North America and Europe relative to the other continents? What does this tell you about the perspective of the mapmakers?

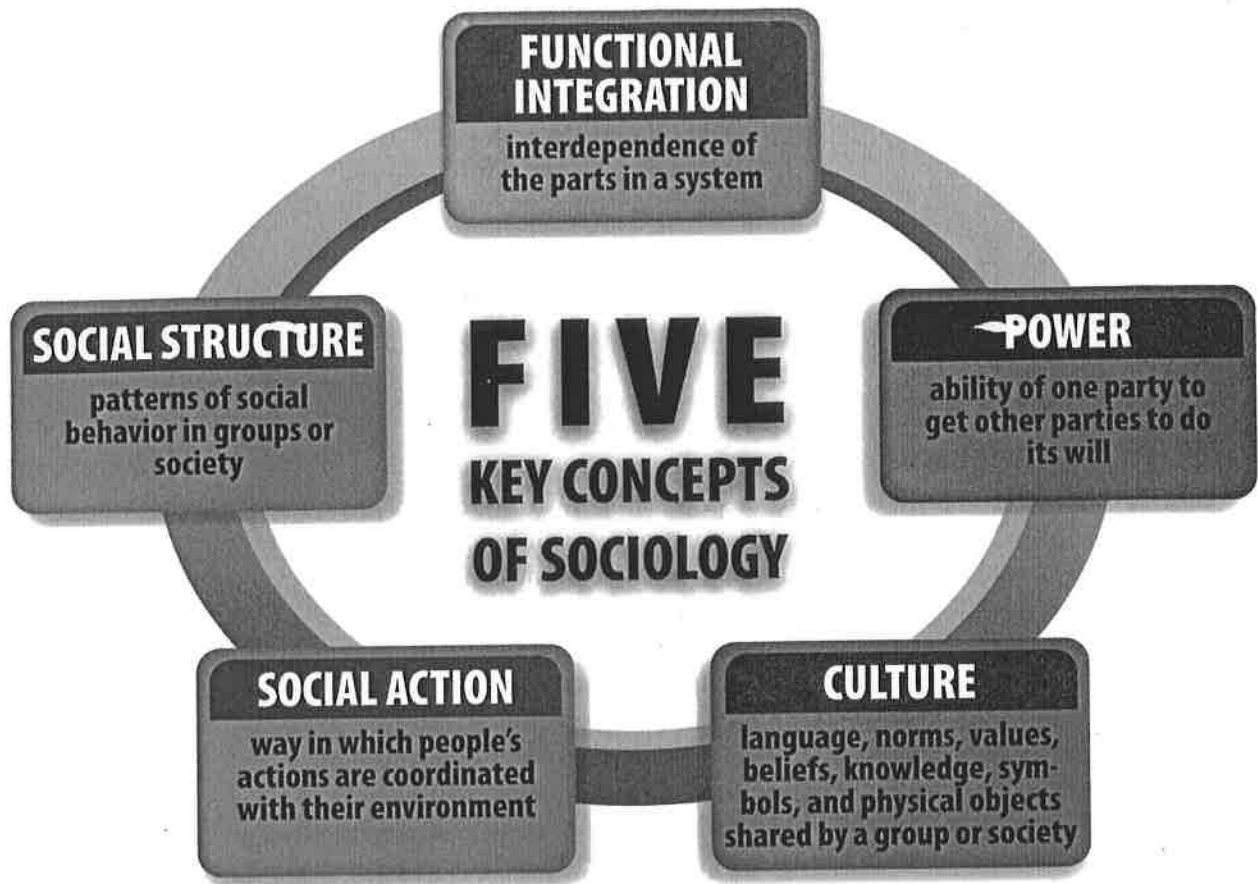


CHART ^

FIVE KEY CONCEPTS

The five key concepts of sociology serve as the building blocks of social theory.

► CRITICAL THINKING

- 1. Assessing** Why are the key concepts important to building theoretical perspectives?
- 2. Making Connections** Why is functional integration an important concept in functionalism?

It is inferred from people's movements and actions and from the social institutions in society. *Social institutions* are the organized ways in which a society meets its basic needs. In the United States these include the family, economy, religion, education, law, and politics. Social structure is a central concept in functionalism and conflict theory. For functionalists, social structure is the glue that holds the different parts of society together and enables functional integration. Conflict theorists, on the other hand, emphasize the imbalance of power in social relationships and social institutions.

- *Power* refers to the ability of one party to get other parties to do its will or to ensure that it will benefit from the actions of other parties. This definition mirrors Max Weber's view of power. Weber was interested in the role of power in conflict and in social stratification. He saw social class—people's economic position in society—and social status as dimensions of power. According to Weber, social class was the result of an unequal distribution of economic power, while social status was a reflection of social power. Today, power is an important concept in conflict theory.
- *Social action* refers to the way in which someone's actions are coordinated with his or her environment. Social action is a central concept in symbolic interactionism.
- *Culture* refers to the language, norms, values, beliefs, knowledge, symbols, and physical objects that are shared by members of a society or group. The concept of culture is incorporated in each of the three major theoretical perspectives.

☑ READING PROGRESS CHECK

Analyzing Why does sociology need more than one theoretical perspective?

Functionalism

GUIDING QUESTION *How does functionalism explain social change?*

Functionalism emphasizes the contributions (functions) of each part of a society. For example, family, economy, and religion are “parts” of a society. The family contributes to society by providing for the reproduction and care of its new members. The economy contributes by dealing with production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. Religion contributes by emphasizing beliefs and practices related to sacred things.

Functionalism and Social Change

Functionalists see the parts of a society as an integrated whole. A change in one part of a society leads to changes in other parts. A major change in the economy, for example, may change the family—which is precisely what happened as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Before the Industrial Revolution when most people made their livings by farming, a large farm labor force was needed. Families fulfilled this need by having many children. The need disappeared as industrialization proceeded, and smaller families became the norm.

Functionalism assumes that societies tend to return to a state of stability after some upheaval has occurred. A society may change over time, but functionalists believe that it will return to a stable state. It will do this by changing in such a way that society will be similar to what it was before. Student unrest and other protests during the late 1960s illustrate this. The activities of civil rights activists, antiwar demonstrators, and other protesters helped bring about some changes:

- Many Americans became suspicious of the federal government’s foreign policy.
- Schools and universities became more responsive to students’ needs and goals.
- Environmental protection became an important political issue to many Americans.

Yet these changes did not revolutionize American society. They were absorbed into it. As a result, our society is only somewhat different from the way it was before the student unrest. In fact, most of the student radicals are now part of the middle-class society they once rejected.

The Nature of Functions

According to functionalism, most aspects of a society exist to promote a society’s survival and welfare. It is for this reason that all complex societies have economies, families, governments, and religions. If these elements did not contribute to a society’s well-being and survival, they would disappear.

Recall that a function is a contribution made by some part of a society. According to Robert Merton, there are two kinds of functions. **Manifest functions** are intended and recognized. **Latent functions** are unintended and unrecognized. One of the manifest functions of school, for example, is to teach math skills. A latent (and positive) function of schools is the development of close friendships.

Not all elements of a society are positive. Elements that have negative consequences result in **dysfunction**. Dysfunctions of bureaucracies, for example, include rigidity, inefficiency, and impersonality.

functionalism approach that emphasizes the contributions made by each part of society

manifest functions intended and recognized consequences of an aspect of society

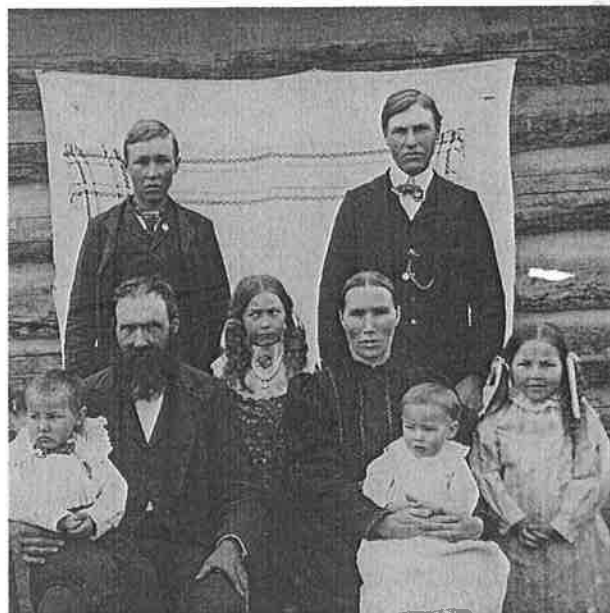
latent functions unintended and unrecognized consequences of an aspect of society

dysfunction negative consequences of an aspect of society

Having many children meant there would be enough hands to work the family farm.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Drawing Conclusions What was the manifest function of large farm families? What might have been a latent function?



Theoretical Perspectives

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE MAJOR PERSPECTIVES

The three major perspectives in sociology hold different assumptions and ask different kinds of research questions.

Theoretical Perspective	Assumptions	Questions Asked
Functionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A society is relatively stable. • A society tends to seek relative stability. • Most aspects of society contribute to the society's well-being and survival. • A society rests on the consensus of its members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What holds society together? • What are the major parts of society? • How are the parts of society held together? • How does each part function to help society work?
Conflict Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A society experiences inconsistency and conflict everywhere. • A society is continually subjected to change. • A society involves the constraint and coercion of some members by others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What forces divide society? • How do people with privilege and power protect their position? • How do people without power and privilege challenge the system and seek change?
Symbolic Interactionism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People's interpretations of symbols are based on the meanings they learn from others. • People base their interaction on their interpretations of symbols. • Symbols permit people to have internal conversations that help them gear their interaction to the behavior they think others expect of them and the behavior they expect of others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What meanings do people attach to their experiences? • How do people shape their own realities? • How do behaviors and meanings change from person to person and situation to situation?

► CRITICAL THINKING

1. Identifying Central Ideas Explain in your own words how functionalism and conflict theory view society differently.

2. Contrasting Describe how the three perspectives might approach the study of laws in society in different ways.

When you go to the division of motor vehicles to register your car or get your driver's license, the clerk may treat you like a "number" rather than as an individual. You may not like the clerk's bureaucratic inflexibility and impersonality.

The Role of Values

Finally, according to functionalism, there is a consensus on values. *Values* are broad ideas about what most people in a society consider to be desirable. Values are important because they influence social behavior. Most Americans, for example, agree on the desirability of democracy, individualism, action over inaction, efficiency and practicality, achievement and success, and equal opportunity. Consensus in another society might produce a different set of values. This consensus of values, say the functionalists, accounts for the high degree of cooperation found in any society. As Émile Durkheim pointed out, however, consensus is strongest in small tribal societies. As societies become more complex, consensus needs to be reinforced by more rules.

✓ READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying Cause and Effect According to the functionalist perspective, why does change in one part of society lead to change in other parts?

Conflict Perspective

GUIDING QUESTION *How does the conflict perspective explain social change?*

The **conflict perspective** emphasizes conflict, competition, change, and constraint within a society. Understanding the conflict perspective is easier when you understand functionalism because the assumptions behind these two perspectives are the reverse of each other.

The Role of Conflict and Constraint

Functionalists see a basic agreement on values within a society. This leads them to emphasize the ways in which people cooperate to reach common goals. The conflict perspective, in contrast, focuses on the disagreements among various groups in a society or between societies. Groups and societies compete as they attempt to preserve and promote their own special values and interests.

Supporters of the conflict perspective see social living as a contest. Their central question is “Who gets what?” According to this perspective, it is those with the most **power**—the ability to control the behavior of others—who get the largest share of whatever is considered valuable. Those with the most power have the most wealth, prestige, and privileges. Because some groups have more power than other groups, they are able to constrain, or limit, the less powerful groups in society. In this way, they are able to maintain their power.

Conflict Perspective and Social Change

Many conflicting groups exist in a society. As the balance of power among these groups shifts, change occurs. For example, the women’s movement set out to change the balance of power between men and women. Over the course of this movement, we have seen larger numbers of women in occupations once limited to men. More women are either making or influencing decisions in business, politics, medicine, and law. Gender relations are changing in other ways as well. The divorce rate has risen as women have gained more economic power. Women in earlier generations might have been forced by economic circumstances to remain in unhappy marriages. Today, economically independent women are apt to end unhappy marriages through divorce. In addition, more women are choosing to remain single, to marry later in life, to have fewer children, and to divide household tasks with their husbands. According to the conflict perspective, these changes are the result of increasing power among women.

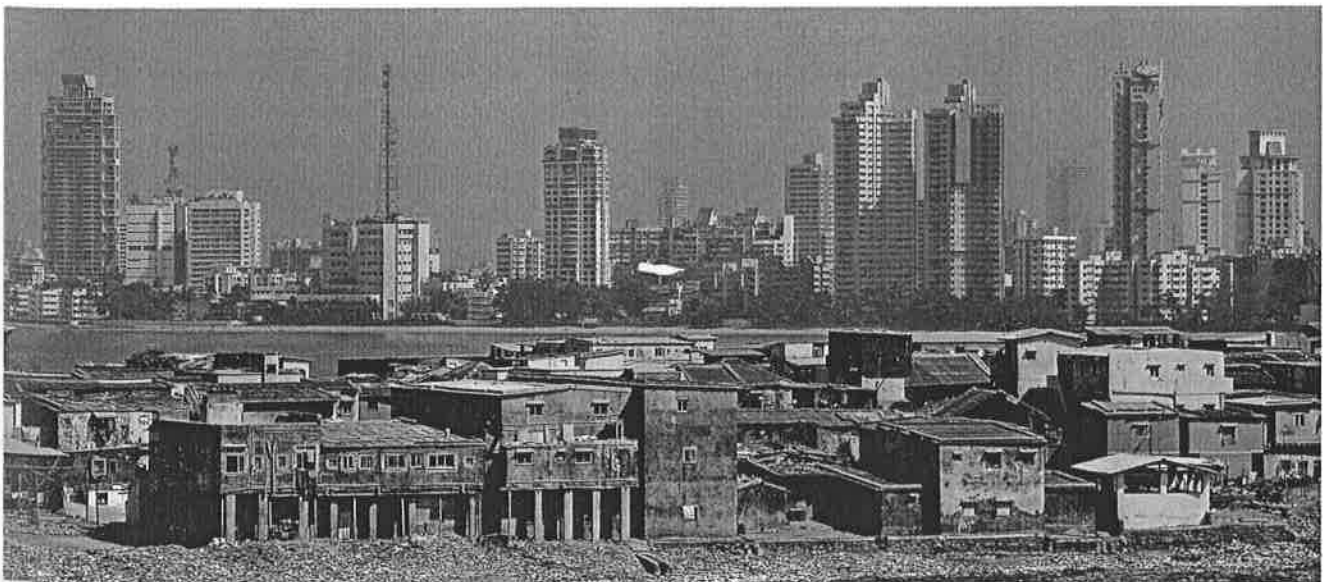
conflict perspective
approach emphasizing the role of conflict, competition, and constraint within a society

power the ability to control the behavior of others

Conflict theorists are interested in the balance of power among groups in society.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Formulating Questions What question might a conflict theorist ask about this photograph showing a slum in Mumbai, India?



Quick Case Study

WHAT MAKES US CHANGE BEHAVIORS?

People often change their behaviors based on how others react. How does this process take place?

Procedure

1. Interview five people about a time they changed their behavior because of the reactions of others.
2. Record each person's account. Ask questions to get at specifics about the reactions and how the person felt.

Analysis

As you read through the accounts, consider these questions.

1. In what ways did other people show their negative reaction to the behaviors?
2. How did the people you interviewed interpret the reactions of others?
3. What "internal conversations" did the people you interviewed have with themselves?

Comparing Functionalism and the Conflict Perspective

You might be asking yourself which theoretical perspective is better—functionalism or the conflict perspective? The answer is neither. There is no "better" perspective. Each perspective highlights certain areas of social life. The advantages of one perspective are the disadvantages of the other. Functionalism explains much of the consensus, stability, and cooperation within a society. The conflict perspective explains much of the constraint, conflict, and change. A look at how the two perspectives approach the social change brought on by the rapid spread of the Internet illustrates this point.

Functionalists see the Internet as having both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, the linking of computers has many benefits. Parents can work at home and spend more time with their children. Individuals with physical disabilities can do jobs at home that might be denied them otherwise, thus becoming more fully integrated into society. On the other hand, there are dysfunctions. Young people may have easy access to pornographic material, which can distort their views of the opposite sex. Hate groups can be formed by strangers who live hundreds or thousands of miles apart. Their anonymity may encourage them to engage in antisocial or violent behavior that they would otherwise avoid.

Conflict theorists would agree with functionalists that the Internet is changing American society and helping speed the development of new technologies. They would be more likely, however, to focus on the negative consequences—what functionalists would consider dysfunctions. Whereas a functionalist might choose to focus on how computer links give workers more flexibility, a conflict theorist might focus on how high-speed broadband connections make it possible for American companies to lay off service workers and move their jobs to other countries where wages are lower. Each chapter, throughout the text, will illustrate both functionalism and the conflict perspective, as well as the perspective discussed next—symbolic interactionism.

✓ READING PROGRESS CHECK

Making Connections According to the conflict perspective, what role does power play in social change?

Symbolic Interactionism

GUIDING QUESTION How does symbolic interactionism explain social change?

Both functionalism and conflict theory deal with large social units, such as the economy, and broad social processes, such as cooperation or conflict among social classes. At the close of the nineteenth century, some sociologists began to change their approaches to the study of society. Instead of concentrating on large social structures, they turned their attention to the way people interact. Two sociologists, George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, developed the insight that groups exist only because their members influence each other's behavior. These early American sociologists created **symbolic interactionism**, a perspective that focuses on the actual *interaction* among people.

The Significance of Symbols

To understand social interactionism, we need to talk first about symbols. A **symbol** is something chosen to represent something else. It may be an object, a word, a gesture, a facial expression, or a sound. A symbol is something observable that often represents something not observable, something that is **abstract**. For example, your school's team mascot is often used as a symbol of the abstract concept of school loyalty. The American flag is a symbol of the United States.

The meaning of a symbol is not determined by its own physical characteristics. Those who create and use the symbols assign the meanings to them. If people in a group do not share the same meaning for a given symbol, confusion results. For example, if some people interpreted the red light of a traffic signal to mean *go* while others interpreted it to mean *stop*, chaos would result. The importance of shared symbols is reflected in the formal definition of symbolic interactionism: the theoretical perspective that focuses on interaction among people—interaction based on mutually understood symbols.

Basic Assumptions

Herbert Blumer, who coined the term *symbolic interactionism*, outlined three assumptions central to this perspective. First, according to symbolic interactionism, we learn the meaning of a symbol from the way we see others reacting to it. For example, American musicians in Latin America soon learn that when audience members whistle at the end of a performance, they are expressing the abstract concept of disapproval. Whistling serves the same function in Latin America that booing does in the United States.

symbolic interactionism

approach that focuses on the interactions among people based on their mutually understood symbols

symbol anything that stands for something else and has an agreed-upon meaning attached to it

abstract expressing a quality or characteristic apart from any specific object or instance



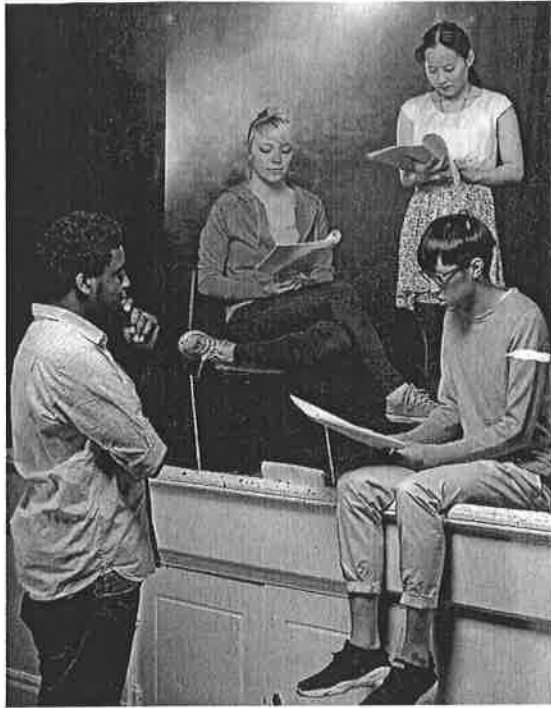
< CARTOON

THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

Symbols have shared meanings.

► CRITICAL THINKING

1. **Analyzing** What is the reaction of the older men to the younger people's conversation?
2. **Finding the Main Idea** What point about symbols does this cartoon illustrate?



Dramaturgy likens human interaction to a theatrical performance.

► **CRITICAL THINKING**

Comparing In what ways is human interaction like a play?

dramaturgy approach that depicts human interaction as theatrical performances

Second, once we learn the meanings of symbols, we base our behavior (interaction) on them. Now that the musicians know that whistling symbolizes a negative response, they will definitely avoid an encore if the crowd begins whistling.

Finally, we use the meanings of symbols to imagine how others will respond to our behavior. Through this capability, we can have “internal conversations” with ourselves. These conversations enable us to visualize how others will respond to us before we act. This is crucial because we guide our interactions with people according to the behavior we think others expect of us and we expect of others. Meanwhile, these other people are also having internal conversations. The interaction (acting on each other) that follows is therefore symbolic interaction.

Dramaturgy

In an attempt to better explain the patterns of interaction that make up social life, sociologist Erving Goffman introduced **dramaturgy**. This approach depicts human interaction as a theatrical performance. At the heart of dramaturgy is the notion that we have images of ourselves we want to present to others. We also have assigned roles we play in our everyday lives. We use

these roles to present our desired images of ourselves to others. Like actors on a stage, we present ourselves through dress, gestures, and tone of voice. Goffman referred to this as the *presentation of self* or *impression management*.

According to Goffman, our theatrical presentations take place on our front stages. For example, your sociology classroom would be a front stage. The image you project in class is the one you want others to see as the real you. We also have back stages. These are the places where we can relax, discuss our performances, and plan new performances. Your bedroom with the door closed might be your back stage. Sometimes the same location serves as both a front stage and a back stage. If you are alone in your sociology classroom and use the time to brush your hair, the classroom is your back stage. The minute someone comes through the door, it becomes your front stage.

✓ **READING PROGRESS CHECK**

Inferring How do the “internal conversations” people hold help explain why people might change their behaviors?

LESSON 3 REVIEW



Reviewing Vocabulary

- 1. **Examining** What is the difference between a manifest function and a latent function?
- 2. **Academic Vocabulary** What do the supporters of symbolic interactionism mean by the term *symbol*?

Using Your Notes

- 3. **Listing** Use the lists in your graphic organizer to write a brief description of each of sociology’s three main theoretical perspectives.

Answering the Guiding Questions

- 4. **Defining** What is a theoretical perspective?

- 5. **Explaining** How does functionalism explain social change?
- 6. **Expressing** How does the conflict perspective explain social change?
- 7. **Interpreting** How does symbolic interactionism explain social change?

Writing Activity

- 8. **Informative/Explanatory** Observe an event in school. Record the details. Then write a brief analysis of the event using one of the three theoretical perspectives.