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1. Read the concept
2. Think like a sociologist
3. Choose the best answer

Build the vocabulary, theories, and methods a first sociology course expects, diagnose distractors, and turn every missed question into a focused repair.

INSTITUTIONS	SOCIAL PATTERNS	SOCIAL PROCESSES	STRATIFICATION	PERSPECTIVE
20%	10%	25%	25%	20%

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Questions about early sociology often match a thinker to a problem, concept, method, or short case. Begin with the researcher's central question. Ownership and labor conflict point toward Marx. Cohesion and regulation point toward Durkheim. Meaning, authority, and formal rules point toward Weber. Ideals compared with lived inequality point toward Martineau. Community-based urban research points toward Addams, while empirical analysis of race and the color line points toward Du Bois. Reason from the problem before matching a keyword.

1.1 What Sociology Studies

Imagine that Maya receives two job offers on the same afternoon. One pays more but ends after her child-care center closes. The other fits the care schedule but offers no health insurance. Maya must choose, yet she did not create the work hours, insurance rules, local wages, or child-care system that shape the choice. Sociology begins in this meeting between a person's action and an organized social setting.

Start with three questions whenever a case feels abstract. What happened in the person's life? Which relationship or organized arrangement shaped the available choices? What evidence would let us test that explanation? These questions keep sociology grounded. They also prevent a common beginner error: replacing a personal story with the vague claim that "society caused it." A sociological answer names the people, rules, institutions, or networks that carry the influence.

Sociology is the systematic study of society and social interaction. Sociologists examine how people form relationships, organize collective life, build institutions, create meaning, and distribute opportunities, risks, and costs. A psychologist might ask why one student feels anxious before an exam. A sociologist might ask why anxiety is concentrated in schools where a single test controls graduation or scholarships. The feeling belongs to an individual. Its patterned distribution may reflect an institutional rule.

Four related ideas clarify the sociological lens. Think of them as a map, not a vocabulary pile. **Social structure** is the broad pattern of institutions, statuses, roles, relationships, networks, and inequalities that organizes social life. A **social institution** is a durable system of roles, norms, organizations, and practices that organizes a major domain such as family, education, religion, the economy, politics, or medicine. A **network** is a set of social ties through which information, support, influence, and resources can travel. **Agency** is the capacity to interpret a situation, make a choice, and act within social conditions.

These concepts overlap without meaning the same thing. Institutions form one part of the wider social structure. Networks connect people within and across institutions. Agency belongs to actors who interpret situations and choose among available routes. Structure does not turn people into puppets. It influences which routes exist, how costly they are, what resources people can reach, and how likely a choice is to succeed.

Return to Maya's job search. The regional labor market and child-care system form parts of the structure. Employers and care centers are organizations located within economic and family-related institutions. Former coworkers form a network that carries news about openings. Maya exercises agency when she applies, asks a contact for help, negotiates hours, or rejects an offer. None of these elements works alone. A good sociological explanation shows how they operate together.

Maya's choice gives us the starting problem: how do people act within conditions they did not create? Mills connects that question to history. The thinkers later in the chapter then show us different ways to investigate conflict, cohesion, meaning, inequality, and evidence.

The boundary between sociology and nearby fields comes from the question. Economics may emphasize prices and incentives, political science may emphasize public authority, and psychology may emphasize cognition or behavior. Sociology may study the same job search when the aim is to explain relationships, organizations, norms, and systematically distributed access. More than one discipline can illuminate a case.

A sociological question

A city notices that bus ridership falls sharply after 8 p.m. One explanation might focus on riders' preferences. A sociological study would also examine route frequency, neighborhood coverage, work schedules, disability access, fares, and public investment. The question widens from what one rider prefers to how transportation is organized and who can use it.

The shift from a personal answer to a sociological one takes practice. Suppose a student misses class three times. A personal explanation might mention motivation, sleep, or planning. Those factors could matter. A sociologist would also check the bus schedule, work hours, care duties, attendance rules, and whether absences cluster among students facing the same conditions. The wider inquiry does not excuse every choice. It asks which conditions make one choice easier for some people and costly for others.

Watch the level of the claim. Evidence that Maya asked a former coworker for a lead shows a network process. Evidence that an employer requires evening hours shows an organizational rule. Evidence that most local jobs lack predictable schedules shows a labor-market pattern. Those observations can fit one account, but they are not interchangeable. A first-time learner may call every outside influence "society." A stronger answer names the relationship, institution, or rule that carries the influence. On a CLEP item, choose the most specific concept supported by the facts in the stem.

Structure shapes a choice without deciding it

Two applicants face the same rule: the job starts at 6 a.m. One uses savings to wait for another opening. The other accepts because rent is due on Friday. The work schedule belongs to the structure. Savings and social ties affect each person's options. Both applicants still interpret the situation and act. A full sociological explanation asks what conditions they share and why those conditions carry different costs.



Quick Review

Teach it back: How are structure, institution, network, and agency related? Structure is the broad arrangement of social life. Institutions organize major domains within it. Networks carry information and resources through social ties. Agency is the capacity to interpret conditions and act within them. A complete answer shows their interaction.

1.2 The Sociological Imagination

Zoom in. What is happening in one life? Now zoom out. What changed in the economy, the law, an institution, or a community? C. Wright Mills called the ability to connect those views the **sociological imagination**. It links biography with history and personal experience with larger social arrangements. Mills distinguished **personal troubles**, which appear within a person's immediate relationships and circumstances, from **public issues**, which are rooted in institutions and the organization of society. The same eviction, layoff, or illness may be a private crisis for one household and part of a public issue when a shared social mechanism helps produce many similar outcomes.

A missed mortgage payment may follow illness, budgeting trouble, or a temporary loss of income. A national foreclosure wave is different. It calls for evidence about unemployment, lending rules, housing prices, and policy. The household experience remains personal, but a shared economic and institutional pattern may help produce it.

Biography includes a person's family story, education, work, health, and decisions. History supplies the period in which those experiences occur. A factory worker laid off in 1932, a union machinist employed in 1972, and an app-based driver in 2026 all sell labor. They face different technologies, laws, labor markets, and expectations. Mills's point is not that history erases choice. It is that a life cannot be explained apart from its social time.

Frequency alone does not turn a trouble into a public issue. Ten unrelated flat tires on the same day remain separate mishaps. Ten blowouts traced to one defective tire model indicate a shared organizational cause. The second pattern invites evidence from manufacturing records, recalls, and comparisons across models. A public issue therefore requires more than repetition: it requires a plausible social mechanism and evidence linking that mechanism to the patterned outcome.

An institutional rule can supply that mechanism. Suppose a district moves every high school's start time to 6:45 a.m. and tardiness rises across its campuses. Researchers could compare attendance before and after the change, examine bus routes, and ask which families can provide alternate transportation. Each late arrival is recorded against one student, yet the common timetable helps explain the group-level change.

Rates are useful because they reveal distribution and change, but a rate cannot identify its own cause. If evictions rise, researchers still need evidence about rents, wages, housing supply, lease rules, and court procedures. Chapter 3 develops ways to test such explanations. For now, remember that a social pattern raises a causal question. It does not prove the answer by itself.

Individual action and public organization can matter at the same time. A person searching for housing still chooses a budget, location, and application strategy. Regional wages, zoning, transit, and the supply of low-cost units shape the options that choice can reach. Sociological imagination rejects both extremes. It does not blame every patterned hardship on character, and it does not treat people as passive products of structure.



Jalen's housing search

Jalen cannot find an apartment he can afford near his workplace. His search is a personal trouble. If rents have risen faster than wages across the region while low-cost units disappear, affordability is also a public issue. To support that conclusion, a researcher would compare changes in rents, wages, and available units rather than infer a cause from Jalen's experience alone.

Move	Question	Jalen's case
Biography	What is happening in this life?	Jalen cannot afford an apartment near work.
Pattern	Who else faces a similar outcome?	Many workers face the same rent–wage gap.
Mechanism	Which shared arrangement could produce it?	Rents rise while wages and low-cost supply lag.
Evidence	What would support or weaken the claim?	Rent, wage, vacancy, and commuting data over time.

A useful test is to imagine two kinds of evidence. A detailed interview can show how Jalen experiences the search, which choices he considered, and what the rejection meant to him. Regional records can show whether rents, wages, vacancies, and commuting times changed for many households. The interview gives depth. The records show distribution. Joined together, they connect biography with history without pretending that either source answers every question.

Be careful with conclusions about individuals drawn from group rates. If a city with high unemployment also has high eviction, the pattern does not prove that every evicted tenant lost a job. Some tenants may face illness, a rent increase, family change, or another cause. The group pattern guides the next question. It does not write each biography. CLEP questions often reward this restraint. Pick the answer that connects a personal case to a shared mechanism while leaving room for evidence about the person's own circumstances.

Serious hardship alone does not make a condition a public issue. The deciding evidence is a recurring outcome tied to a shared social mechanism. The reverse mistake is equally costly. Calling housing affordability a public issue does not erase Jalen's decisions. Mills connects levels of explanation so that a student's answer can hold personal action and organized conditions in view at the same time.

Quick Review

What turns repeated troubles into a public issue? State the three parts before looking back. A strong answer names a recurring outcome, a shared social or historical mechanism, and evidence that connects the two.

1.3 Why Sociology Emerged

Sociology received its academic name in nineteenth-century Europe, where industrialization, urbanization, political revolution, secularization, and growing confidence in systematic observation made social order newly difficult to explain. People in many societies had long examined power, community, morality, and inequality. The institutions that later defined the conventional canon marginalized important contributors within and beyond Europe.

No single event produced sociology. Several transformations occurred together, and each made a different problem visible. The Enlightenment encouraged the view that reason, observation, and comparison could reveal regularities in social life. Political revolutions challenged monarchy, inherited rank, and traditional authority. Industrial capitalism reorganized property and work. Rapid urban growth placed strangers in dense contact and made unequal living conditions easier to observe and count. Secularization reduced the control of religious authority over some public institutions and sharpened questions about shared morality.

Historical change	Social consequence	Question made urgent
Enlightenment reasoning	Greater trust in observation and comparison	Can society be studied systematically?
Political revolution	Contested monarchy, rank, and citizenship	What makes authority legitimate and social order stable?
Industrialization	Wage labor, factory discipline, new wealth, and class conflict	Who controls work and who benefits from production?
Urbanization	Dense settlement, strangers, disease, and visible neighborhood inequality	How do cities create order, risk, and unequal life chances?
Secularization	Reduced religious control in some public domains	What else can support morality, belonging, and regulation?

14. Which of the following projects most closely reflects Jane Addams's settlement-based sociology?

A. Measuring urban growth with census totals while avoiding contact with residents

B. Mapping wages and sanitation with neighborhood residents and using the findings in reform efforts

C. Explaining poverty through personality scores collected in a laboratory

D. Comparing societies to biological organisms and treating inequality as adaptation

E. Studying rule-bound offices solely to measure administrative efficiency

15. A researcher studies a hospital by asking who controls labor, how specialized occupations depend on one another, and why workers accept rule-based authority. These questions correspond respectively to

A. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber

B. Weber, Marx, and Durkheim

C. Durkheim, Weber, and Marx

D. Martineau, Comte, and Addams

E. Comte, Spencer, and Du Bois

Answers are at the end of Part I, page 41.

Chapter 2

Theories and Levels of Analysis

Let the question choose the lens

At noon, a school cafeteria becomes three different sociological problems. One researcher asks how lunch schedules coordinate hundreds of students. Another asks why some students receive fresher food and more time to eat. A third watches how clothing and table choice signal belonging. All three stand in the same room, yet each gathers different evidence. This chapter first builds theories and levels of analysis, then compares four major perspectives, and finally shows how a focused explanation meets evidence. After these lessons, you can identify a theory's central question, choose the correct analytical level, and state what evidence would support or weaken a claim.



Treat these terms as competing lenses. Picture the question each one would ask, then earn the square by distinguishing that lens from its nearest rival in a new case.

Spot the outcome ▪ **Follow the mechanism** ▪ **Choose the lens**

Building explanations

- ☐ **Theory:** An organized explanation connecting concepts to show why a social pattern occurs.
- ☐ **Middle-range theory:** An explanation of a limited set of social patterns under stated conditions.
- ☐ **Micro:** A level of analysis focused on face-to-face interaction and everyday meaning.
- ☐ **Hypothesis:** A focused, testable prediction about a relationship that evidence can support or weaken.
- ☐ **Macro:** A level of analysis focused on societies, institutions, and large-scale patterns.
- ☐ **Meso:** A level of analysis focused on organizations, communities, and networks between micro and macro.

Systems and inequality

- **Functionalism:** A perspective asking how social arrangements affect coordination, continuity, and adaptation.
- **Structural functionalism:** Another name for functionalism, emphasizing interdependent social structures and their consequences.
- **Manifest function:** An intended and recognized consequence of a social practice or institution.
- **Latent function:** An unintended consequence outside a social practice's recognized purpose.
- **Dysfunction:** A consequence that disrupts stability, adaptation, or effective operation for a social system.
- **Conflict theory:** A perspective examining how unequal power and competing interests shape rules and outcomes.
- **Ideology:** A system of ideas that explains, supports, or challenges social arrangements.
- **Class consciousness:** Awareness of shared class interests and a willingness to act around them.

Meaning and gendered power

- **Symbolic interactionism:** A perspective studying how people create meaning through symbols and everyday interaction.
- **Symbol:** Something that carries a shared meaning beyond its immediate physical form.
- **Dramaturgy:** Goffman's approach to interaction as performances shaped for particular audiences and settings.
- **Feminist theory:** A family of perspectives examining gendered power, inequality, experience, and social change.
- **Patriarchy:** A social system where men as a group hold disproportionate institutional power.
- **Intersectionality:** An approach examining how linked systems of inequality jointly shape people's positions and experiences.

On the CLEP

Start with the research question. A concern with consequences for coordination suggests functionalism. Unequal control of resources suggests conflict analysis. Meaning built in an encounter suggests symbolic interactionism. Gendered rules or combined systems of inequality suggest feminist or intersectional analysis. The topic alone cannot choose the theory because every perspective can study a school, family, workplace, or hospital.

2.1 What a Theory Does

A sociological **theory** is a connected set of ideas that explains a relationship in social life. It does more than name a pattern. If two districts have different graduation rates, description tells us that a difference exists. A theory proposes why it exists, perhaps through unequal funding, peer networks, teacher expectations, or the way schools sort students into courses.

Think of a theory as a lens with a job. A lens brings some relationships into focus while leaving others at the edge. Functionalism asks about coordination and consequences. Conflict approaches ask about unequal power and resources. Symbolic interactionism asks how people create meaning in encounters. Feminist theories ask how gendered power is organized and how it joins other inequalities. Theories compete when they offer different explanations for the same result, but they can also explain different parts of one case.

Use the same three moves whenever a theory question feels crowded. First, **name the outcome** that needs explanation. Next, **follow the mechanism** that could produce it. Finally, **choose the level and the evidence** that match that mechanism. In the cafeteria from the chapter opening, a long lunch line is the outcome. Poor coordination, unequal access to faster service, and the public meaning of a negative account balance are three different mechanisms. The setting stays the same. The explanation changes.

Lens	Listen for	Ask this first
Functionalism	consequence, coordination, adaptation, interdependence	What does this practice do for a defined group or system?
Conflict approaches	control, scarce resources, competing interests, unequal costs	Who can shape the rule, and who gains or loses?
Symbolic interactionism	label, symbol, interpretation, identity, encounter	What meaning guides the participants' actions?
Feminist theory	gendered authority, unpaid care, bodily control, intersecting inequalities	How does gendered power operate, and where does it meet another system?

A **hypothesis** is narrower than a theory. It states a specific prediction that evidence can test. A theory about social networks may propose that well-connected people receive job information sooner. A hypothesis might predict that, during the next six months,



students with at least three employed adults in their close networks will report hearing about more job openings than students with no such ties. The hypothesis names groups, a time period, measurable variables, and an expected difference.

Theories also operate at different scales. **Macro-level** analysis studies large institutions, social systems, populations, and long historical patterns. A national class system or a fifty-year change in family formation belongs here. **Micro-level** analysis studies interaction, meaning, and behavior in small settings, such as how two people negotiate a disagreement. **Meso-level** analysis examines the organizations, communities, and networks that connect encounters with wider institutions.

The **unit of analysis** is the entity observed or compared, such as a person, encounter, organization, neighborhood, or country. The **analytical level** is the scale of the relationship being explained. They can differ. A study may survey individual nurses as its units while testing whether hospital staffing rules, a meso-level feature, predict burnout. A four-minute interview supports micro analysis when the claim concerns meaning negotiated in that encounter. The noun naming the data source does not choose the level by itself.

Here is a reliable way to keep the two ideas apart. Finish the sentence, "The researcher observes or compares *what*?" Your answer names the unit of analysis. Then finish a second sentence: "The explanation operates through *what relationship*?" Your answer reveals the analytical level. A researcher might observe individual students but explain their course placement through a school tracking policy. The students are the units. The organizational policy is the meso-level mechanism.

Level	Typical focus	Example relationship
Macro	institutions, populations, national systems, long-term change	A national labor law changes bargaining power across industries.
Meso	organizations, communities, networks, institutional links	A hospital staffing rule changes nurses' workloads.
Micro	encounters, meanings, identities, gestures, small groups	A receptionist interprets a patient's quiet voice as low urgency.

One hospital case can join the levels. A national reimbursement rule changes which services receive payment. Hospital administrators respond by reducing overnight staff and creating a new triage unit. During one shift, a nurse has four minutes to interpret a patient's account and assign priority. The rule is macro, the hospital response is meso, and the encounter is micro. Repeated encounters can later alter the hospital's data and influence a policy review, so causation can move in both directions.

Levels cannot be exchanged carelessly. Suppose School A has 70 percent club membership and an average exam score of 82, while School B has 30 percent club membership and an average of 74. Concluding that every club member scores higher commits the **ecological fallacy**. School averages do not reveal the individual relationship. The reverse error is the **individualistic**, or **atomistic**, fallacy. Finding an eight-point advantage among individual club members does not establish that any school would gain eight points by expanding clubs. Funding, selection, and program quality remain organizational relationships.

When reading a CLEP stem, underline the relationship being explained. National policy and class systems point toward macro analysis. A hospital, neighborhood association, or network points toward meso analysis. A label, gesture, or face-to-face interpretation points toward micro analysis. Then ask whether the stem merely describes a pattern or offers a relationship that could explain it.

From theory to hypothesis

A theory proposes that teacher expectations shape student performance through differences in feedback. A testable hypothesis predicts that equally prepared students randomly described to teachers as "high potential" will receive more detailed feedback over four weeks than students without that label. Together, the theory supplies the mechanism and the hypothesis states the observable comparison.

The logic runs from **teacher expectation** to **different feedback**, then to **different opportunities to improve**, and finally to a possible **performance difference**. "Teacher expectations matter" is too vague to explain much. The feedback pathway supplies the missing mechanism. The comparison between students and the measurement of feedback make that mechanism testable. When an explanation feels foggy, trace the steps between the proposed cause and outcome. A broken or missing step often reveals the problem.

Do not choose a level from the number of people mentioned. A conversation between two national leaders is micro when the claim concerns gestures and interpretation, while their countries may be the units in a macro comparison of treaties. One company can supply individual employee records for a meso claim about hierarchy. In a close question, state both pieces: what entity is observed, and at what scale does the proposed mechanism operate?

Four shortcuts cause many beginner errors. A large sample is not automatically macro. Ten thousand responses can test a micro claim

