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1 SOCIOLOGY

A Unique Way to View the World

WHAT WILL YOU LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER?

This chapter will help you to do the following:

1.1 Explain the sociological perspective.

1.2 Describe why sociology can be useful for us.

1.3 Explain how the social world model works, with examples.

Please review Tables 1.1 and 1.2 to familiarize yourself with micro, meso, and macro influences.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Micro, Meso, Macro Influences on Life

Micro	ME (MY FAMILY AND CLOSE FRIENDS) LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITY My school, place of worship, hangouts
Meso	NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, INSTITUTIONS, AND ETHNIC SUBCULTURES My political party, ethnic affiliation
Macro	SOCIETY Type of national government and economic system GLOBAL COMMUNITY United Nations, World Bank, Doctors Without Borders, multinational corporations

TABLE 1.2 ■ Think About It

Micro: Local communities	How can sociology help me understand my own life in the context of my social world?
Meso: National institutions, complex organizations, and ethnic groups	How do sociologists help us understand and improve our lives in school, work, and health care organizations?
Macro: National and global systems	How might national and global events affect my life?

This model illustrates a core idea carried throughout the book—how your own life is shaped by your family, community, society, and world, and how you influence them in return. Understanding this model can help you to better understand your social world and to make a positive impact on it.

Can an individual make a difference in the world or in a community? How does your family influence your chances of gaining a college degree and a high-paying job? If you were born into a poor family, what are your chances of becoming wealthy? How does your level of education impact your likelihood of marrying—and staying married? Why are Generation Zers less likely to have sex than Generation Xers? How can sociology help you understand and be an effective member of society?

These are some of the questions a deeper understanding of our social world can help you answer. Sociology gives us new perspectives on our personal and professional lives and sociological insights and skills that can help make the world a better place. Sociology can change your life—and help you change the world.

Sometimes, it takes a dramatic and shocking event for us to realize just how deeply embedded we are in our social relationships in the social world that we take for granted. The COVID-19 pandemic was one such occurrence. The new norms it required us to follow violated the rules that support our connections to one another. In fact, it was imperative that we physically distance ourselves from one another and actively avoid social interactions. Protests on campus during the war between Israel and Hamas is another example of changing norms. Not since the 1960s have so many campuses across the nation seen such activism among students.

Most of the time, we live with social patterns that we take for granted as routine, ordinary, and expected. These social patterns help us understand what is happening and know what to expect. Unlike

COVID-19 showed us how deeply embedded our social relationships—and the norms surrounding them—truly are.

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our innate drives, social expectations come from those around us and guide (or constrain) our behaviors and thoughts. Without shared expectations among humans about proper patterns of behavior, life would be chaotic. Our social interactions require some basic rules, and these rules create routine and normalcy. It is strange if someone breaks the expected patterns. As society changes, however, so do our social patterns. Imagine how you used to react to people wearing face masks or staging sit ins on campuses. What was once strange behavior became normalized.

This chapter examines the social ties that make up our social world, as well as sociology's focus on those connections. You will learn what sociology is, what sociologists do, how sociology can be used to improve your life and society, and how the social world model helps us understand how society works.

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Sociology is *the scientific study of social life, social change, and social causes and consequences of human behavior*. Sociologists examine how society both shapes and is shaped by individuals, small groups of people, organizations, national societies, and global social networks. For you, this means learning how what you do affects other people and groups—and how they affect your life.

Unlike the discipline of psychology, which focuses on the attributes, motivations, and behaviors of individuals, sociology focuses on group patterns. Rather than focus on why individuals behave in certain ways, sociologists focus on how people behave in groups, and the social patterns of group behavior. Sociologists also examine the causes of social problems, such as delinquency, child abuse, crime, poverty, and war, and ways they can be addressed.

Two-person interactions—*dyads*—are the smallest units studied by sociologists. Examples of dyads include roommates discussing their classes, a professor and student going over an assignment, a husband and wife negotiating their budget, and two children playing. Next in size are small groups consisting of three or more interacting people who know each other—a family, a neighborhood or peer group, a classroom, a work group, or a street gang. Then come increasingly larger groups—organizations such as sports or scouting clubs, neighborhood associations, and local religious congregations. Among the largest groups contained within nations are ethnic groups and national organizations or institutions, such as Google and Facebook, the Republican and Democratic national political parties, and national religious organizations, such as the Southern Baptists. Nations themselves are still larger and can sometimes involve hundreds of millions of people. In the past several decades, social scientists have increasingly focused on **globalization**, *the process by which the entire world is becoming a single interdependent entity*. Of particular interest to sociologists is how these various groups are organized, how they function, how they influence one another, and why they can come into conflict.

Here, children experience ordered interaction in the competitive environment of a soccer game. What values, skills, attitudes, and assumptions about life and social interaction do you think these young kids are learning?

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Identify several dyads, small groups, and large organizations to which you belong. Did you choose to belong, or were you born into membership in these groups? How does each group influence who you are and the decisions you make? How do you influence each of the groups?

Ideas Underlying Sociology

The idea that one action can cause or result in another is a core idea in all science. Sociologists also share several ideas that they take for granted about the social world. These ideas about humans and social life are supported by considerable evidence, and they are no longer matters of debate or controversy. They are considered true. Understanding these core assumptions helps us see how sociologists approach the study of people in groups.

People are social by nature

Humans seek contact with other humans, interact with one another, and influence and are influenced by the behaviors of others. Furthermore, humans need groups to survive. Although a few individuals may become socially isolated as adults, they could not have reached adulthood without sustained interactions with others.

People live much of their lives belonging to social groups

Our connections to our social groups shape our beliefs, behaviors, opportunities, and challenges. The groups we belong to shape where we see ourselves in society, the power we hold, and the conflicts we engage in. Even our identities are based on our group affiliations. Think about it. How would you answer the question, Who are you? Most likely you would immediately ground yourself in the groups to which you belong—your family, race or ethnicity, workplace, school, friend group, etc.

Interaction between the individual and the group is a two-way process in which each influences the other

We can influence the shape and direction of our group, just as the group provides the rules and decides the expected behaviors for individuals. For example, imagine you are on a sports team. How do you influence the team? How does the team shape you?

Recurrent social patterns, ordered behavior, shared expectations, and common understandings among people characterize groups

Normally, a degree of continuity and recurrent behavior is present in human interactions, whether in small groups, large organizations, or society. We can distinguish groups from one another based on their social patterns. Think about how you regularly greet members of the different groups to which you belong. No doubt, you enter classrooms differently than your family home or your workplace. This is an example of group-driven patterned behavior.

The processes of conflict and change are natural and inevitable features of groups and societies

No group or society (which is made up of different groups) can remain unchanged and hope to perpetuate itself. To survive, groups must adapt to changes in the social and physical environment; yet rapid change often comes at a price. It can lead to conflict—between those who favor change and those who have vested interests in traditional ways of doing things. For example, the marriage equality movement has both prompted change and garnered backlash from those opposed to such changes. Likewise, global warming has created environmental catastrophes and pitted those who suffer from them against those who profit from polluting the planet.

You will find the previous ideas underlying sociology relevant in each of the topics we discuss. As you read this book, keep in mind these basic ideas that form the foundation of sociological analysis: People are social, they live and carry out activities largely in groups, interaction influences both individual and group behavior, people share common behavior patterns and expectations, and processes such as change and conflict are always present. These sociological understandings will provide you with a sociological eye. With it, you can see what many others miss in our social world.

Sociological Findings and Commonsense Beliefs

Through research, sociologists have shown that many commonly held beliefs—"common sense"—are not actually true. Here are two examples.

Belief: Most of the differences in the behaviors of women and men are based on "human nature"; men and women are just different from each other

Research shows that biological factors certainly play a part in the behaviors of men and women, but the culture (beliefs, values, rules, and way of life) that people learn as they grow up determines who does what and how biological tendencies are played out. A unique example illustrates this: In the nomadic Wodaabe tribe in Central Africa, women do most of the heavy work, whereas men adorn themselves with makeup, sip tea, and gossip (Pleasance, 2020). Each year, the group holds a festival where men adorn makeup and fancy hairstyles and show their white teeth and the whites of their eyes to attract a marriage partner. Variations in the behavior of men and women around the world are so great that it is impossible to attribute behavior to biology or human nature alone.

Belief: Racial groupings are based on biological differences among people

Racial categorizations are socially constructed (created by members of society) and vary among societies and over time within societies. A person can be seen as one race in Brazil and another in the United States. Even within the United States, racial categories have changed many times. Take a look at old U.S. Census records to see how racial categories change over time—even within the same nation! We discuss the social construction of the concept of race in Chapter 8.

In the early 20th century, immigrants to the United States of Irish and Italian ancestry were not considered "White" in Virginia and several other states. In some cases where parochial schools were not an option, Irish and Italian children were forced to go to racially segregated public schools with Black students.

As these examples illustrate, the discipline of sociology provides a method to assess the accuracy of our commonsense assumptions about the social world. To improve the lives of individuals in our communities and in societies around the world, decision makers must have accurate information. Sociological research can be the basis for more rational and just social policies—policies that better meet the needs of all groups in the social world. The sociological imagination, discussed next, helps us see if what is happening in our individual lives relates to social patterns across society.

The Sociological Imagination

Events in our social world can affect our individual lives in ways we may not recognize without a *sociological imagination*. If we are unemployed or lack funds for a college education, we may say this is a personal problem. Yet broader social issues are often at the root of our personal situation. Many individual problems (private troubles) are rooted in social or public issues (what is happening in the social world outside one's personal control). Distinguished sociologist C. Wright Mills called *the ability to understand the relationship between individual experiences and public issues* the **sociological imagination** (C. W. Mills, 1959).

Consider, for example, someone you know who has been laid off from a job. This personal trauma is a common situation during a recession. Unemployed persons often experience feelings of inadequacy or lack of self-worth because of the job loss. Their unemployment, though, may be due to larger forces, such as a machine taking over their job, a global pandemic, corporate downsizing, or a corporation moving operations to another country where labor costs are cheaper and there are fewer environmental regulations on companies. People may blame themselves or each other for personal troubles, such as unemployment, believing they did not try hard enough. Often, they do not see the connection between their private lives and larger economic and social forces beyond their control. They fail to recognize the public issues that create private troubles.

If you are having trouble paying for college, that may feel like a very personal trouble. High tuition rates, though, occur in part due to a dramatic decline in governmental support for public higher education and financial aid for students and fierce competition among private colleges to provide more and better campus programs and amenities for students. The rising cost of a college education is a serious public issue that our society needs to address. Individuals alone cannot reduce the high price of college.

As you develop your *sociological imagination*, you will notice how social forces shape individual lives and group behavior. Connecting events from the global and national levels to the personal and intimate level of our own lives is the core organizing theme of this book.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

How has unemployment, poverty, war, or some other societal issue caused personal troubles for someone you know? Give examples of why it is inadequate to explain these personal troubles by examining only the personal characteristics of those affected.

Questions Sociologists Ask

Sociologists ask questions they can answer through scientific research. Rather than focus on what people *should* think, sociologists focus on *what* people do think—and *why*. Sociologists do not determine the right or wrong answers to value-driven opinions. They are, however, interested in how people's beliefs influence their behavior. They use scientifically grounded research to determine the causes and consequences of people's beliefs and behaviors. Sociologists may have personal opinions about issues they research but they are bound by professional ethics to follow scientific procedures in their research and to report all their findings (no matter what they are).

Sociologists might ask, How do social settings affect alcohol consumption? The sociological researcher does not make judgments about whether use of alcohol is good or bad or right or wrong. The sociologist does, however, observe variations in the use of alcohol in different social situations and the resulting behaviors. The focus of sociology is on facts, what causes behaviors. For example, a person might become intoxicated at a fraternity party but not at their boss's wedding reception, even though they are offered alcohol at both. The expectations for behavior in each social setting affect the level of alcohol consumption.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Consider the information you have just read. What are some questions sociologists might ask about drinking and drunkenness? What are some questions sociologists would not ask about these topics, at least while in their role as researchers?

Binge drinking may be a source of storytelling at a college party but can be offensive at a wedding reception.

The Social Sciences: A Comparison

Not so long ago, our views of people and social relationships were based solely on stereotypes, intuition, superstitions, supernatural explanations, and traditions passed on from one generation to the next. Natural scientists (e.g., chemists, astronomers, biologists, and oceanographers) were the first to use the scientific method to understand the world around us, a model later adopted by social scientists. Social scientists, including sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, economists, cultural geographers, historians, and political scientists, apply the scientific method to study social relationships, to correct misleading and harmful misconceptions about human behavior, and to guide policy decisions. Consider the following examples of social science studies.

Consider an *anthropologist* who studies garbage. He examines what people discard to understand what kind of lives they lead. *Anthropology* is the study of humanity in its broadest context. It is closely related to sociology, and the two areas have common historical roots and sometimes overlapping methodologies and subject matter. However, anthropologists have different specialties in four major subfields within anthropology: physical anthropology (which is related to biology), archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology (sometimes called *ethnology*). This last field has the most in common with sociology. Cultural anthropologists study the culture, or way of life, of a society.

Anthropologists can learn about a society by studying what it throws away. What do you think they would learn about you from your garbage?

A *psychologist* may wire research subjects to a machine that measures their physiological reaction to a violent film clip and then ask them questions about what they were feeling. *Psychology* is the study of individual behavior and mental processes (e.g., sensation, perception, memory, and thought processes). It differs from sociology in that it focuses on individuals rather than on groups, institutions, and societies. Although there are different branches of psychology, most psychologists are concerned with individual motivations, personality attributes, attitudes, perceptions, abnormal behavior, mental disorders, and the stages of normal human development.

A *political scientist* may study opinion poll results to predict who will win the next election, how various groups of people are likely to vote, or how elected officials will vote on proposed legislation. *Political science* is concerned with government systems and power—how they work, how they are organized, the forms of government, relations among governments, who holds power and how they obtain it, how power is used, and who is politically active. Political science overlaps with sociology, particularly in the study of political theory and the nature and uses of power.

Many *economists* study the banking system and market patterns to try to predict trends and understand the global economy. *Economists* analyze economic conditions and explore how people organize, produce, and distribute material goods. They are interested in supply and demand, inflation and taxes, prices and manufacturing output, labor organization, employment levels, and comparisons between postindustrial, industrial, and nonindustrial nations.

What these social sciences—sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, and economics—have in common is that they study aspects of human behavior and social life. Social sciences share many common topics, methods, concepts, research findings, and theories, but each has a different focus or perspective on the social world. Each of these social science studies relates to topics also studied by sociologists, but sociologists focus on human interaction, groups, and social structure, providing the broadest overview of the social world.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Consider the issue of unemployment in the United States. What is one question in each discipline that an anthropologist, a psychologist, a political scientist, an economist, and a sociologist might ask about the social issue of unemployment?

WHY DOES SOCIOLOGY MATTER?

Sociology helps you to understand your relationships with other people and whether to support specific social policies. You can also use skills developed through sociology in a wide range of career fields.

Why Study Sociology?

The sociological perspective helps us be more effective as we carry out our roles as life partners, workers, friends, family members, and citizens. For example, an employee who has studied sociology may better understand how to work as part of a group and how the structure of the workplace affects individual behavior, how to approach problem-solving, and how to collect and analyze data. Likewise, a schoolteacher trained in sociology may have a better understanding of classroom management, student motivation, the causes of poor student learning that have roots outside the school, and why students drop out.

What Can Studying Sociology Help You Do?

When you view our social world with a sociological perspective, you

1. become more self-aware by understanding your social surroundings, which can lead to opportunities to improve your life;
2. have a more complete understanding of social situations by looking beyond individual explanations to include group analyses of behavior;
3. understand and evaluate problems more clearly, viewing the world systematically and objectively rather than only in emotional or personal terms;
4. gain an understanding of the many diverse cultural perspectives and how cultural differences are related to behavioral patterns;
5. assess the impact of social policies;
6. understand the complexities of social life and how to study them scientifically;
7. gain useful skills in interpersonal relations, critical thinking, data collection and analysis, problem-solving, and decision-making; and
8. learn how to change your local environment and the larger society.

Many sociologists work outside of academia, using their knowledge and research skills to address the needs of businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government. For example, they may work in human resources departments and as consultants for businesses. In government jobs, they provide data, such as population projections for education and health care planning. In social service agencies, they help provide services to those in need, and in health agencies, they may be concerned with outreach to immigrant communities. Both sociologists who work in universities and those who work outside of academia can use sociological tools to improve society. You will find examples of what you can do with sociological knowledge in the Sociologists in Action boxes throughout the book.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

From what you have read so far, how might sociological tools (e.g., social interaction skills and knowledge of how groups work) be useful to you in your anticipated major and career or current job?

Ask employers what they want in a new hire, and the focus is likely to be on writing, speaking, and analytical skills. Other desired skills include the ability to cope with change; work effectively in diverse teams; gather and interpret quantitative information; and other "soft skills," such as leadership, communication, and collaboration. These are precisely the skills students gain in sociology courses!

The next section of this chapter shows how the various parts of society that sociologists study relate to each other and outlines the social world model you will follow as you continue to learn about sociology.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Imagine that you are a mayor, a legislator, a police chief, or another government official. You make decisions based on information gathered by social science research rather than on your own intuition or assumptions. What are some advantages to this decision-making method?

THE SOCIAL WORLD MODEL

Think about the different groups you depend on and interact with every day. You wake up to greet members of your family or your roommate. You go to a larger group—a class—that exists within an even larger organization—the college or university. Understanding sociology and the approach of this book requires a grasp of **levels of analysis**—that is, *social groups from the smallest to the largest*. As we mentioned earlier, groups range from two or more friends to a sports team or a sorority or fraternity, to state governments to global corporations and international organizations. Through reading this text, you will develop a sociological understanding of these groups and the connections among them.

The **social world model** *helps us picture the levels of analysis in our social surroundings as an interconnected series of small groups, organizations, institutions, and societies*. Sometimes, these groups are connected by mutual support and cooperation, but other times, there are conflicts and power struggles over access to resources. To understand the units or parts of the social world model, look at Figure 1.1 (and at the beginning of each chapter).

We use this social world model throughout the book to illustrate how each topic fits into the big picture: our social world. The social world includes both *social structures* and *social processes*.

Social Structures

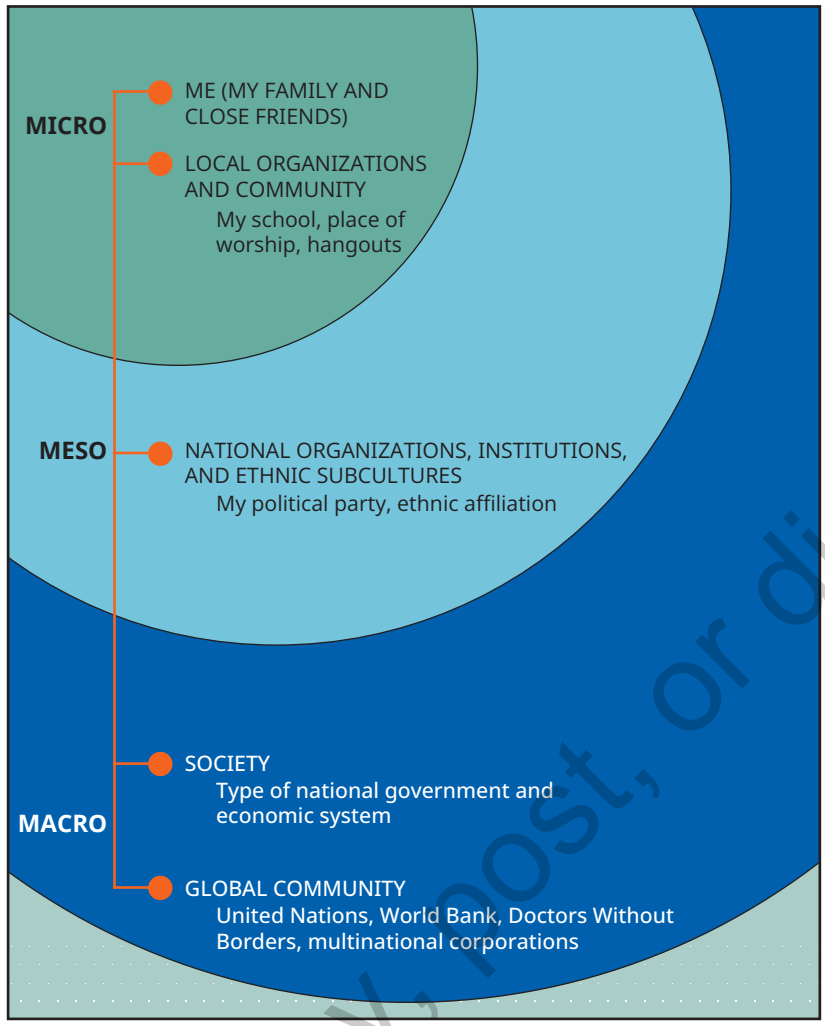
Picture the human body, held together by bones and muscles and relying on organs to keep it functioning. The organs, or *units*, that make up that body include the brain, heart, lungs, and kidneys. Like organs in our body, **social units** are *interconnected parts of the social world, ranging from small groups to societies*. These social units include dyads (two people); small groups, such as the members of a family; community organizations, including schools and religious groups; large-scale organizations, such as political parties or state and national governments; and global societies, such as the United Nations.

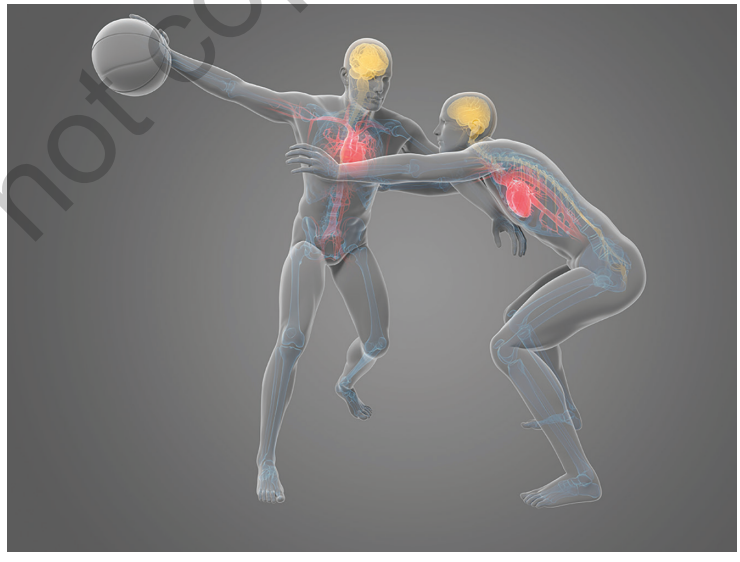
All these social units connect to make up the **social structure**—*the stable patterns of interactions, statuses (positions), roles (responsibilities), and organizations that provide stability for the society and bring order to individuals' lives*. Think about these parallels between the structure that holds together the human body and the structure that holds together societies and their units.

Sometimes, however, the units within the social structure are in conflict. For example, a religion that teaches that some forms of birth control are wrong may conflict with the health care system regarding how to provide care to women. This issue has been in the U.S. news, because some religious organizations and religious businessowners have fought against the requirements of the Affordable Care Act that employers provide birth control to those who wish to receive it.

Social institutions are *organized, patterned, and enduring sets of social structures that provide guidelines for behavior and help each society meet its basic survival needs*. Think about the fact that all societies have some form of family, education, religion, politics, health care, and economics; in more complex societies, there are also essential structures that provide science, media, advanced health care, and a military. These are the institutions that supply the rules, roles, and relationships to meet human needs

FIGURE 1.1 ■ The Social World Model





All social institutions are interrelated, just as the parts of the body are interdependent: If the skeletal system of the body breaks down, the muscular system and nervous system are not going to be able to get the body to do what it needs to do.

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and guide human behavior. They are the units through which organized social activities take place, and they provide the setting for activities essential to human and societal survival. For example, we cannot survive without an economic institution to give guidelines and a structure for meeting our basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Likewise, society would not function without political institutions to govern and protect its members. Most social units fall under one of the main institutions just mentioned.

This refugee mother and child from Belarus represent the smallest social unit, a dyad. In this case, they are trying to survive with help from larger groups, such as the United Nations.

Like the human body, society and social groups have a structure. Our body's skeleton governs how our limbs are attached to the torso and how they move. Like the system of organs that make up our bodies, all social institutions are interrelated. Just as an illness in one organ affects other organs, a dysfunction in one institution affects the other institutions. A heart attack affects the flow of blood to all other parts of the body and a faltering economy affects the flow of money to other parts of society.

The **national society**, one of the largest social units in our model, *includes a population of people, usually living within a specified geographic area, connected by common ideas and subject to a particular political authority.* It also features a social structure with groups and institutions. In addition to having relatively permanent geographic and political boundaries, a national society has one or more languages and a unique way of life. In most cases, national societies involve countries or large regions where the inhabitants share a common identity as members. In certain other instances, such as the contemporary United Kingdom, a single national society may include several groups of people who consider themselves distinct nationalities (i.e., Welsh, English, Scottish, and Irish). Such multicultural societies may or may not have peaceful relations.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

How might change in one national institution, such as health care, affect change in other national institutions, such as the family and the economy?

Social Processes

If social structure is like the human body's skeleton and organs, social processes are similar to the physical activities that keep the body alive—the heart beating, the lungs processing oxygen, and the stomach processing nutrients. **Social processes** *take place through actions of people in institutions and*

other social units. The process of *socialization* teaches individuals how to behave in their society. It takes place through actions in families, educational systems, religious organizations, and other social units. Socialization is essential for the continuation of any society because, through this process, members of society learn the thoughts and actions needed to survive in their society. The process of *change* also occurs continuously in every social unit; change in one unit affects other units of the social world, often in a chain reaction. For instance, change in the quality of health care can affect the workforce; a workforce in poor health can affect the economy; instability in the economy can affect families, as breadwinners lose jobs; and family economic woes can affect religious communities because devastated families cannot afford to give money to churches, mosques, or synagogues.

Sociologists try to identify, understand, and explain the processes that take place within social units. Picture these processes as overlying and penetrating our whole social world, from small groups to societies. Social units would be lifeless without the action brought about by social processes, just as body parts would be lifeless without the processes of electrical impulses shooting from the brain to each organ or the oxygen transmitted by blood coursing through our arteries to sustain each organ.

Our Social World and Its Environment

Surrounding each social unit, whether a small family group or a large corporation, is an **environment**—*the setting in which the social unit works, including everything that influences the social unit, such as its physical and organizational surroundings and technological innovations*. Just as each individual has a unique environment with family, friends, and other social groups, each social unit has an environment to which it must adjust. For example, your local church, mosque, or temple may seem autonomous and independent, but it depends on its environment, including its national organization for guidelines and support; the local police force to protect the building from vandalism; and the local economy to provide jobs to members so that the members, in turn, can support the organization. If the religious education program is going to train children to understand the scriptures, local schools are needed to teach the children to read. A religious group may also be affected by other religious bodies, competing with one another for potential members from the community. These religious groups may work cooperatively—organizing a summer program for children or jointly sponsoring a holy day celebration—or they may define one another as evil, each trying to malign or stigmatize the other. Moreover, one local religious group may be composed primarily of professional and businesspeople and another group mostly of laboring people. The religious groups may experience conflict, in part, because each serves a different socioeconomic constituency in the environment. To understand a social unit or the human body, we must consider the structure and processes within the unit, as well as the interaction with the surrounding environment.

Perfect relationships or complete harmony among the social units is unusual. Social units, be they small groups or large organizations, are often motivated by self-interest and the need for self-preservation, with the result that they compete with other units for resources (e.g., time, money, skills, and the energy of members). Therefore, social units within a society are often in conflict. Whether groups conflict or cooperate, they remain interdependent and can be studied using the scientific method.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Think of an example of a social unit to which you belong. Describe the environment of the social unit. How does that environment influence that social unit?

Studying the Social World: Levels of Analysis

Picture for a moment your sociology class as a social unit in your social world. Students (individuals) make up the class, the class (a small group) is offered by the sociology department, the sociology department (a large group, including faculty and students) is part of the college or university, and the university (an organization) is located in a community. The university follows the practices approved by the social

institution (education) of which it is a part, and education is an institution located within a nation. Practices the university follows are determined by a larger accrediting agency that provides guidelines and oversight for educational institutions. The national society, represented by the national government, is shaped by global events, such as technological and economic competition among nations, natural disasters, global climate change, wars, and terrorist attacks. Such events influence national policies and goals, including policies for the educational system. Thus, global issues and conflicts may shape the content of the curriculum taught in your classroom, from what you study to the textbooks you use.

As discussed, each of these social units is referred to as a *level of analysis* (two students in a discussion group, to a society or global system; see Table 1.3). The social world model at the beginning of each chapter illustrates social units, and the examples in the model show their relation to that chapter's content.

TABLE 1.3 ■ Levels of Analysis and Education

	Levels	The Social Institution of Education
Micro-level analysis	Small groups	Sociology class; professor and student interacting; study group cramming for an exam
Meso-level analysis	Organizations and institutions	State boards of education; National Education Association
Ethnic groups within a nation	Islamic *madrassas* or Jewish *yeshiva* school systems	
Macro-level analysis	Nations	Policy and laws governing education
Global community	World literacy programs	

Micro-Level Analysis

A **micro-level analysis** focuses on *individual or small-group interaction in specific situations*. One-to-one and small-group interaction form the foundation of all social groups and organizations to which we belong, from families to corporations to societies. We are members of many groups at the micro level.

To understand micro-level analysis, consider the problem of spousal abuse. Why does a person remain in an abusive relationship, knowing that each year thousands of people are killed by their partners and millions more are severely and repeatedly battered? To answer this question, several possible micro-level explanations can be considered. One view is that the abusive partner has convinced the abused person that they are powerless in the relationship or that they "deserve" the abuse. Therefore, the abused person gives up in despair of ever being able to alter the situation. The abuse is viewed as part of the interaction—of action and reaction—and some partners come to see abuse as what composes normal interaction.

Another explanation for remaining in the abusive relationship is that battering is a familiar part of the person's everyday life. However unpleasant and unnatural this may seem to outsiders, it may be seen by the abused as a normal and acceptable part of intimate relationships, especially if they grew up in an abusive family.

Another possibility is that an abused person may fear that their children would be harmed or that they would be harshly judged by their family or religious group if they "abandoned" their mate. Or they may not have the resources they need to leave. Studying each of these possible explanations involves analysis at the micro level because each issue posed here focuses on interpersonal interaction factors rather than on large society-wide trends or forces. Moving to the next level, meso-level analysis leads to different explanations for abuse.

Meso-Level Analysis

Meso-level analysis involves looking at *intermediate-sized units smaller than the nation but larger than the local community*. This level includes national institutions (such as the economy of a country, the national educational system, or the political system within a country), nationwide organizations (such as a political party, a soccer league, or a national women's rights organization), and ethnic groups that

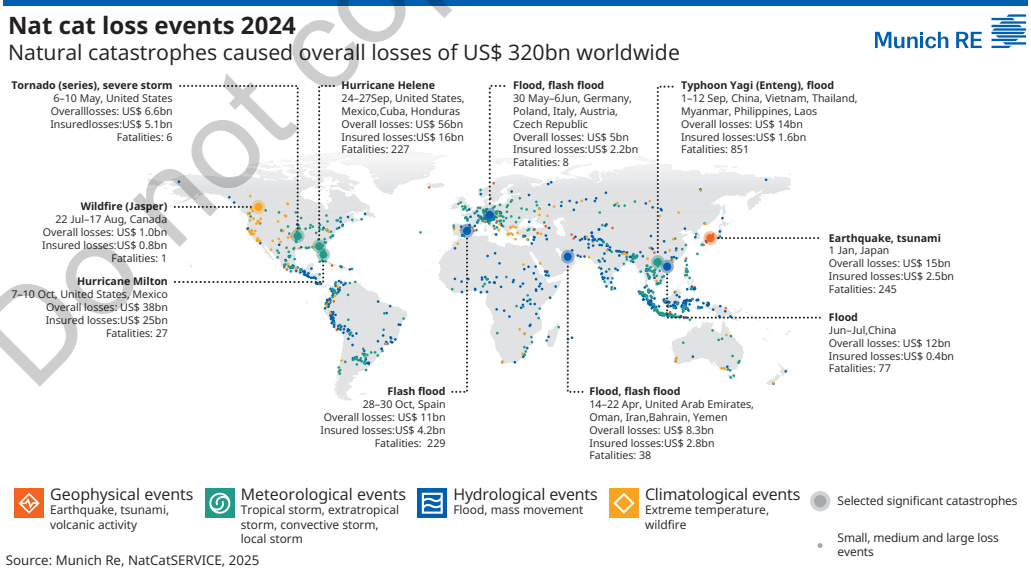
have an identity as a group (such as Jewish people, Mexican Americans, or Native Americans in the United States). Organizations, institutions, and ethnic communities are smaller than the nation or global social units, but they are still beyond the everyday personal experience and control of individuals. They are intermediate in the sense of being too large to know everyone in the group, but they are not as large as nation-states. For example, state governments in the United States, provinces in Canada, prefectures in Japan, and cantons in Switzerland are at the meso level and usually more accessible and easier to change than the national bureaucracies of these countries.

In discussing micro-level analysis, we used the example of domestic violence. Recognizing that personal troubles can often relate to public issues, many social scientists look for broader explanations of spousal abuse, such as social conditions at the meso level of society (Straus, 2017; Straus et al., 2006). When a pattern of behavior in society occurs with increasing frequency, it cannot be understood solely from the viewpoint of individual cases or micro-level causes. For instance, sociological findings show that fluctuations in spousal or child abuse at the micro level relate to levels of unemployment in meso-level organizations and macro-level government economic policies. Frustration resulting in abuse can erupt within families when poor economic conditions make it nearly impossible for people to find stable and reliable means of supporting themselves and their families. The message here is that we must address meso-level economic issues in society to decrease domestic violence.

Macro-Level Analysis

Studying the largest social units in the social world, called **macro-level analysis**, involves looking at *entire nations, global forces (such as international organizations), and international social trends*. Macro-level analysis is essential to our understanding of how larger societal forces and global events shape our everyday lives. A natural disaster, such as recent droughts and floods in North America and West Africa, and massive hurricanes in Central America and the Caribbean, may change the foods we can serve at our family dinner table because much of what we consume comes from other parts of the world. (Figure 1.2 shows some of the deadliest natural disasters in 2020.) Likewise, a political conflict on the other side of the planet can lead to war, which means that a member of your family may be called to active duty and sent into harm's way many thousands of miles from your home. Each member of the family may experience individual stress, have trouble concentrating, and feel ill with worry. The entire globe has become an interdependent social unit. If we are to prosper and thrive in the world today, we need to understand connections that go beyond our local communities. We are, indeed, members of the global community.

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Natural Disasters in 2023



Source: Munich Re, NatCatSERVICE, 2025

Source: Münchener Rückversicherungs-Gesellschaft. (2024, January 9). *Record thunderstorm losses and deadly earthquakes: the natural disasters of 2023.* https://www.munichre.com/en/company/media-relations/media-information-and-corporate-news/media-information/2024/natural-disaster-figures-2023.html

Distinctions between the levels of analysis are not always sharply delineated. The micro level shades into the meso level, and the lines between the meso level and the macro level are blurry on the continuum. Still, in micro-level social units, you know everyone or at least every person in the social unit knows someone whom you also know.

We all participate in meso-level social units that are smaller than the nation but can be huge. For example, thousands or even millions of individuals join organizations such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), MoveOn.org, or the environmental group 350.org. Those involved participate in dialogues online and contribute money to these organizations. People living thousands of miles from one another united financially and in spirit to support candidates in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. We share connections with the members of these organizations, and our lives are interconnected, even if we never meet face to face.

The macro level is even more removed from the individual, but its impact can change our lives. For example, decisions by lawmakers in Washington, DC, can seem distant, but decisions by Congress and the president may determine whether your own family has health care coverage (and of what quality) and whether the United States will lead or stymie global efforts to address climate change. These government leaders will also determine whether interest rates on federal student loans for U.S. students go up. Try the next Engaging Sociology to test your understanding of levels of analysis.

ENGAGING SOCIOLOGY

MICRO, MESO, MACRO

Look at the following list of social units. Identify which level each group is most likely to belong to: (1) micro, (2) meso, or (3) macro. Why did you answer as you did? The previous definitions should help you make your decisions. Again, some are "on the line" because this is a continuum from micro to macro, and some units could legitimately be placed in more than one group. Which ones are especially on the line?

___ Your nuclear family

___ The United Nations

___ A local chapter of the Lions Club or the Rotary Club

___ Your high school baseball team

___ India

___ NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

___ The First Baptist Church in Muncie, Indiana

___ The World Bank

___ A family reunion

___ Google, Inc. (international)

___ The Department of Education for the Commonwealth of Kentucky

___ The show choir in your local high school

___ African Canadians

___ The Dineh (Navajo) people

___ Canada

___ The Republican Party in the United States

___ The World Court

___ A fraternity at your college

___ IMF (International Monetary Fund)

___ The Ministry of Education for Spain

___The Roman Catholic Church (with its headquarters at the Vatican in Rome)

___Australia

___The Chi Omega national sorority

___Boy Scout Troop #187 in Minneapolis, Minnesota

___Al-Qaeda (an international alliance of terrorist organizations)

___The provincial government for the Canadian province of Ontario

___The United States of America

The Social World Model and This Book

Throughout this book, we use the social world model as the framework for understanding the social units, the processes, and the surrounding environment. We look at each social unit and process. We take the unit out, examine it, and then return it to its place in the interconnected social world model so that you can comprehend the whole social world and its parts, like putting a puzzle together. In doing so, we gain a more complete and accurate perspective on the social world. Look for the model at the beginning of every chapter.

Our next chapter asks the following questions: When we say we know something about society, how is it that we know? What is considered evidence in sociology, and what lens (theory) do we use to interpret the data? We now turn to how we gather data to help us develop hypotheses, test theories, and understand the social world.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

How can sociology help you see new aspects of your life and change society? Throughout this book, you will find ideas and examples that will help answer these questions. You will learn how to view the social world through a sociological lens and use the *sociological imagination*. Understanding how the social world works from the micro through the meso to the macro level helps us interact more effectively in it. Using the sociological imagination enables us to see how individual troubles can be rooted in social issues and are best addressed with an understanding of the meso and macro level. This knowledge enables us to be better family members, workers, citizens, and members of the global community.

We live in a complex social world with many layers of interaction. If we really want to understand our own lives, we need to comprehend the levels of analysis that affect our lives and the connections between those levels. To do so wisely, we need both objective lenses for viewing this complex social world and valid information (facts) about society. As the science of society, sociology can provide both tested empirical data and a broad, analytical perspective, as you will learn in the next chapter. Here is a summary of points from Chapter 1:

- Humans are, at our very core, social animals—more akin to pack or herd animals than to individualistic cats.
- Sociology is based on scientific findings, making it more predictable and reliable than opinions or commonsense beliefs in a particular culture.
- A core idea in sociology is the sociological imagination. It helps us see how historical and structural events influence our individual lives. It also allows us to see how we can influence our society.
- Sociology is a social science and, therefore, uses the tools of the sciences to establish credible evidence to understand our social world. As a science, sociology is scientific and strives to be objective rather than value-laden.
- Sociology has practical applications, including those that are essential for the job market.

- Sociology focuses on social units or groups, on social structures such as institutions, on social processes that give a social unit its dynamic character, and on their environments.
- The social world model is the organizing theme of this book. Using the sociological imagination, we can understand our social world best by clarifying the interconnections among micro, meso, and macro levels of the social world. Each chapter of this book focuses on one major topic in sociology using society at these three levels of analysis.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think of a problem that impacts you personally (e.g., the high cost of tuition, unemployment, or divorce) and explain how you would make sense of it differently if you viewed it as (a) only a personal problem or (b) influenced by a public issue. How do possible solutions to the problem differ depending on how you view it?
2. How can sociology help you become a more informed citizen and better able to understand how government policies impact society?
3. What are three ways the sociological perspective can help you succeed in college and the workforce?
4. Think of some of the ways the social institutions of government and education are connected. Why is it in the interest of the government to support higher education? How has government support (or lack of support) impacted your college experience?
5. Imagine you would like to look at reasons behind the high college dropout rate in the United States. How might your explanations differ based on whether your analysis was on the micro, meso, or macro level? Why? Which level or levels would you focus on for your study? Why?

KEY TERMS

environment
globalization
levels of analysis
macro-level analysis
meso-level analysis
micro-level analysis
national society
social institutions
social processes
social structure
social units
social world model
sociological imagination
sociology

CONTRIBUTING TO OUR SOCIAL WORLD: WHAT CAN WE DO?

At the end of this and all subsequent chapters, you will find suggestions for work, service learning, internships, and volunteering that encourage you to apply the ideas discussed in the chapter. Suggestions for Chapter 1 focus on student organizations for sociology majors and nonmajors.

At the Local (Micro) Level

- *Student organizations and clubs* enable you to meet other students interested in sociology, carry out group activities, get to know faculty members, and attend presentations by guest speakers. These clubs are usually not limited to sociology majors. If no such organization exists for sociology students at your school, consider forming one with the help of a faculty member. Sociologists also have an undergraduate honors society, Alpha Kappa Delta (AKD). Visit the AKD website at alphakappadelta.org to learn more about the society and what it takes to qualify for membership or to form a chapter.

At the Regional (Meso) Level

- *State, regional, and specialty (education, criminology, social problems, and so forth) sociological associations* are especially student-friendly and feature publications and sessions at their annual meetings specifically for undergraduates. The American Sociological Association website lists regional and specialty organizations, with direct links to their home pages.

At the National or Global (Macro) Levels

- *The American Sociological Association (ASA)* is the leading professional organization of sociologists in the United States. Visit the ASA website and take a look around it. You will find many programs and initiatives of special interest to students. If you are interested in becoming a sociologist, be sure to look at the links under the heading "Career Center." The ASA also sponsors an Honors Program at its annual meeting that introduces students to the profession and gives students a heads-up on being successful in sociology.
- *The International Sociological Association (ISA)* serves sociologists from around the world. Every 4 years, the ISA sponsors a large meeting. Specialty groups within the ISA hold smaller conferences throughout the world during the other years.

Agence Roger Viollet/GRANGER

2 EXAMINING THE SOCIAL WORLD

How Do We Know What We Know?

WHAT WILL YOU LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER?

This chapter will help you to do the following:

2.1 Summarize the development of sociology.

2.2 Describe key theoretical perspectives.

2.3 Explain the scientific approach.

2.4 List the basic steps of the scientific research process.

Please review Tables 2.1 and 2.2 to familiarize yourself with micro, meso, and macro influences.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Micro, Meso, Macro Influences on Life

Micro	ME (MY FAMILY AND CLOSEST FRIENDS) LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITY I am active in a local church, school, clubs, and sports teams.
Meso	NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, INSTITUTIONS, AND ETHNIC SUBCULTURES I am active in a religious denomination, part of an educational system, and a member of an ethnic group.
Macro	SOCIETY I am a citizen of the United States, Canada, or another country. GLOBAL COMMUNITY I am influenced by actions of the United Nations, the World Health Organization, or Doctors Without Borders.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Think About It

Micro: Small groups and local communities	When you are trying to convince neighbors or people in your community to accept your opinion, why are facts and evidence important?
Meso: National institutions, complex organizations, and ethnic groups	How do sociologists gather accurate data about families, educational institutions, or ethnic groups?
Macro: National and global systems	How can theories about national and global processes and interactions help us understand our own lives at the micro level?

The slums of São Paulo, Brazil. Hector lives in a neighborhood with shelters made of available materials, such as boxes, with no electricity or running water and poor sanitation.

Let us travel to the Southern Hemisphere to meet a teenage boy, Hector. He is a 16-year-old, living in a *favela* (slum) on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil. He is a polite, bright boy, but his chances of getting an education and a steady job in his world are limited. Like millions of other children around the world, he comes from a poor, rural family that migrated to an urban area in search of a better life. However, his family ended up in a crowded slum with only a shared spigot for water and one string of electric lights along the dirt road going up the hill on which they live. The sanitary conditions in his community are appalling—open sewers and no garbage collection—and make the people susceptible to various diseases. His family is relatively fortunate, for they have cement walls and wood flooring but no bathroom, running water, or electricity. Many adjacent dwellings are little more than cardboard walls with corrugated metal roofs and dirt floors.

Hector wanted to stay in school but was forced to drop out to help support his family. Since leaving school, he has picked up odd jobs: deliveries, trash pickup, janitorial work, and gardening—to help support his parents and six siblings. Even when he was in school, Hector's experience was discouraging. He was not a bad student, and some teachers encouraged him to continue, but other students from the city teased the *favela* kids and made them feel unwelcome. Most of his friends dropped out before he did. Hector often missed school because of other obligations: looking for part-time work, helping a sick relative, or taking care of a younger sibling. The immediate need to put food on the table outweighed the long-term value of staying in school. What is the bottom line for Hector and millions like him? Because of his limited education and work skills, obligations to his family, and limited opportunities, he most likely will continue to live in poverty along with millions of others in this situation.

Sociologists are interested in factors that influence the social world of children like Hector: family, friends, school, community, and the place of one's nation in the global political and economic structural systems. Sociologists use social theories and scientific methods to examine and understand poverty and many other social issues. In this chapter, you will learn about some of the different data collection methods sociologists use to collect information and the theories they use to make sense of their data.

Sociological research helps you understand how and why society operates and how you might change it. It can also help you make sense of why people in your family, neighborhood, college campus, and workplace act the way they do. You will, no doubt, find yourself in a situation where conducting a research study will help your organization or community.

This chapter introduces you to the basic tools used to plan studies and gather dependable information on topics of interest. It will also help you understand how sociology approaches research questions. To this end, we begin this chapter by discussing the development of sociology as a discipline and the core principles of sociology's major theoretical perspectives. We then explore sociology as a science through core ideas that underlie any science: how to collect data, ethical issues involving research, and practical applications and uses of sociological knowledge. We start with the beginnings and emergence of sociology as a field of study.

DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Throughout recorded history, humans have been curious about how and why society operates as it does. Long before the development of science, religion and philosophy influenced the way individuals thought about the world. Both approaches to understanding society had a strong moral tone. For example, Plato's *Republic*, written around 400 BCE, outlines plans for an ideal state—complete with government, family, economic systems, class structure, and education—designed to achieve social justice. Plato's opinions were derived from abstract reflection about how the social world should work, but they were not tested scientifically.

The first person on record to suggest a systematic approach to explain the social world was North African Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). Khaldun was particularly interested in understanding the feelings of solidarity that held tribal groups together during his day, a time of great conflict and wars (Alagha, 2017; Alatas, 2006).

Rise of Modern Sociology

Sociology, as a discipline, developed out of several conditions that arose during the period from the 1600s to the 1800s. First, European nations were imperial powers extending their influence and control by establishing colonies in other cultures. This exposure to other cultures encouraged at least some Europeans to learn more about the people in and around their new colonies. Second, they sought to understand the rapid changes in their own societies brought about by the Industrial Revolution (which began around the middle of the 1700s) and the French Revolution (1789–1799). Finally, advances in the natural sciences demonstrated the value of the scientific method, and some wished to apply this method to the social sciences and to understanding the social world.

In the early 1800s, no one had clear, systematic explanations for why the old social structure, which had lasted since the early Middle Ages, was collapsing or why cities were exploding with migrants from rural areas. French society was in turmoil, members of the nobility were being executed, and new rules of justice were taking hold. The state became more powerful than churches, and ideas of democracy and equality among citizens were developed and even instituted in some nations. These dramatic changes marked the end of the traditional monarchy and the beginning of a new social order.

It was in this setting that the scientific study of society emerged. Two social thinkers, Henri Saint-Simon (1760–1825) and Auguste Comte (1798–1857), decried the lack of systematic data collection or objective analysis in social thought. These Frenchmen argued that a science of society could help people understand and perhaps control the rapid changes and unsettling revolutions taking place.

Comte officially coined the term *sociology* in 1838. His basic premise was that common ways of understanding the world at that time, through religious or philosophical speculation about society, did not provide an adequate understanding of how to solve society's problems. Just as scientists compiled basic facts about the *physical* world, so too was there a need to gather scientific knowledge about the *social* world. Only then could leaders systematically apply this scientific knowledge to improve social conditions.

Comte asked two basic questions: First, what holds society together and gives rise to a stable order rather than anarchy? Second, why and how do societies change? Comte conceptualized society as divided into two parts: (1) *social statics*, aspects of society that give rise to order, stability, and harmony—what we refer to as *structure*; and (2) *social dynamics*, forces that promote change and evolution (even revolution) in society—what we call *process*. By understanding these aspects of the social world, Comte felt that leaders could strengthen society and respond appropriately to change. His optimistic belief was that sociology would be the "queen of sciences," guiding leaders to construct a better social order (Comte, [1855] 2003).

The Bastille, a state prison in Paris, France, and a symbol of oppression, was seized by the common people during the French Revolution, a social upheaval that forced social analysts to think differently about society and social stability.

Sociology continued developing as scholars tried to understand further changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Massive social and economic transformations in the 18th and 19th centuries brought about restructuring and sometimes the demise of political monarchies, aristocracies, and feudal lords. Scenes of urban squalor were common in Great Britain and other industrializing European nations. Machines replaced both agricultural workers and cottage (home) industries because they produced an abundance of goods faster, better, and cheaper. Peasants were pushed off the land by new technologies and migrated to urban areas to find work; at the same time, a powerful new social class of capitalists emerged. Industrialization brought the need for a new skilled class of laborers, putting new demands on an education system that had served only the elite. More and more families now depended on work and wages in the industrial sector to stay alive.

These changes stimulated other social scientists to study society and its problems. The writings of Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Harriet Martineau, Max Weber, W. E. B. Du Bois, and many other early sociologists set the stage for the development of sociological theories. Accompanying the development of sociological theory was the use of the scientific method—the systematic gathering and recording of reliable and accurate data to test ideas. Du Bois, a Black American who had to deal with racism in and out of academia, was the first scholar in North America to create a truly scientific program for the study of society (A. Morris, 2015).

SOCIOLOGY'S MAJOR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

A **theoretical perspective** is *a basic view of society that guides sociologists' research questions, methods, and analysis. Theoretical perspectives are the broadest theories in sociology, providing overall approaches to understanding the social world and social problems*. Sociologists draw on major theoretical perspectives at each level of analysis to guide their research and to help them understand social interactions and social organizations. **Theories** are *statements or explanations regarding how and why two or more facts are related to each other*. A good theory also allows social scientists to make *predictions* about the social world.

Recall the description of the social world model presented in Chapter 1. It stresses the levels of analysis—smaller units existing within larger social systems. Some theoretical perspectives are especially useful when trying to understand small, micro-level interactions, whereas others help us make sense of large, macro-level structures. Either type of perspective—those most useful at the micro or macro levels—can be used at the meso level, depending on the research question. To illustrate four of the major theoretical perspectives on the social world, we delve into our examination of Hector's circumstances, introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

Micro- to Meso-Level Theories

If we wanted to study Hector's interactions with his friends and their influence on him or his school performance, we would turn to micro- and meso-level theories to guide our research. Two theoretical perspectives often used at the micro and meso levels of analysis are symbolic interaction and rational choice.

Symbolic Interaction

The **symbolic interaction perspective** *sees humans as active agents who create shared meanings of symbols and events and then interact on the basis of those meanings*.

Let's break that down: Through our interactions, we learn to share common ideas, understand what to expect from others, and gain the capability to influence our social world. As we interact, we make use of **symbols**, *actions or objects that represent something else and therefore have meaning beyond their own existence*—such as flags, wedding rings, words, and nonverbal gestures. Such symbolic communication (e.g., language) helps people construct a meaningful world. Humans continually create and re-create society through their construction and interpretation of the social world. More than any other theoretical perspective in the social sciences, symbolic interaction stresses human agency—the active role of individuals in creating their social environment.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), one of the founders of the symbolic interaction perspective, explored how humans define or make sense of situations (G. Mead, [1934] 1962). He placed special emphasis on human interpretations of gestures and symbols (including language) and the meanings we attach to our actions. He also examined how we learn our social **roles** in society, including *expected behaviors, rights, obligations, responsibilities, and privileges assigned to a social status* (such as mother, child, teacher, and friend) and how we learn to carry out these roles. Indeed, as we will see in Chapter 4, Mead insisted that our notion of who we are—our *self*—emerges from social experience and interaction with others. Language is critical to this process, for it allows us to step outside of our own experience and reflect on how others see us.

To summarize, symbolic interaction emphasizes the following:

- People continually create and re-create society through interacting with one another.
- People interact by communicating with one another through the use of shared symbols.
- We learn who we are (our sense of self) and our place in society through interacting with others.

Critique of Symbolic Interaction. Each theoretical perspective has its critics, those who disagree with some aspect of the theory. That is how scientists critique their ideas and develop new theories. Although many sociologists make good use of symbolic interaction, it tends to neglect the macro-level structures of society that affect human behavior. By focusing on interpersonal interactions, large-scale social forces—such as an economic depression or a political revolution—that shape

human destinies receive less consideration. For example, if we focused only on how Hector interacts with his family and friends in trying to determine why he dropped out of school, we would overlook macro forces (e.g., how the lack of government supports for poor families affected his decision to drop out of school).

Despite these limitations, theorists from the symbolic interaction perspective have made significant contributions to understanding the development of social identities and interactions that underlie groups, organizations, and societies. Many of these studies will be discussed throughout the book.

Rational Choice

According to the **rational choice perspective**, *humans are fundamentally concerned with self-interests, making rational decisions based on weighing costs and rewards of the projected outcome of an action.* Researchers who use this perspective see social behavior as an exchange activity—a transaction in which resources are given and received (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974). Every interaction involves an exchange of something valued: money, time, material goods, attention, sex, allegiance, and so on. People stay in relationships because they get something from the exchange, and they leave relationships that have more costs than benefits for them. They constantly evaluate whether there is reciprocity or balance in a relationship so that they are receiving as much as they give. For rational choice theorists, self-interest for the individual is the guiding element in human interaction.

Someone using the rational choice perspective would say Hector would picture the situation as if it were a mental balance sheet. For example, on the plus side, staying in school may lead to opportunities not available to uneducated people. On the minus side, school is a negative experience, and Hector's family needs help to feed its members now, so going to school is a "waste of time." Which side will win depends on Hector's balance sheet and on family and friends' influence over the rewards versus the costs.

In summary, the rational choice perspective involves the following key ideas:

- Human beings are mostly self-centered, and self-interest drives their behavior.
- Humans calculate costs and benefits (rewards) in making decisions.
- Humans are rational in that they weigh choices to maximize their own benefits and minimize costs.
- Every interaction involves exchanges entailing rewards and penalties or expenditures.
- People keep a mental ledger in their heads about whether they owe someone else or that person owes them.

According to rational choice theory, people avoid cost or pain and seek benefits. Thus, people in authority try to control others by imposing costs for behaviors that are unwanted. The cost for this woman for speeding is an expensive ticket, and the city council and police hope it will lead to more desired behavior in her future.

Critique of Rational Choice Theory. Critics point out that the rational choice perspective is rather simplistic and faulty in assuming that all humans are rational. Most people make irrational, rather than rational, behavior choices (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). It also fails to consider the influence of culture and norms that emphasize altruistic behavior or other forms of sacrificing for other individuals or the greater good. Rational choice theorists also have difficulty explaining group, rather than individual, behavior. Organized people have more power than unorganized people—but movements would never start if the first to organize were thinking solely about their individual interests. For example, Rosa Parks let herself get arrested when she sparked the Montgomery bus boycott. That was not a rational choice—but it did promote changes that benefited millions of people.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

How can the symbolic interaction and rational choice perspective help explain behavior? For example, how might a theorist from each perspective explain why some students study hard on a Friday night and others party? How would each of the previous micro theories answer this question a bit differently?

Meso- and Macro-Level Perspectives

Meso- and macro-level perspectives consider large units in the social world: organizations (e.g., General Motors or the Episcopal Church), institutions (e.g., family, education, religion, health care, politics, or economies), societies (e.g., Canada or Mexico), or global systems (e.g., the World Trade Organization or the World Bank). For example, Hector's government at the national and international levels affects his life in a variety of ways. As Brazil industrializes, the nature of jobs and the modes of communication change. Local village cultures adjust as the entire nation gains more uniformity of values, beliefs, and norms. Similarly, resources such as vaccines may be allotted at the local level, but local communities need national and sometimes international support to access resources, as illustrated by the need to create and distribute vaccines for COVID-19 to billions of people across the world. We can begin to understand how macro factors influence Hector, and all of us, by looking at two major macro-level perspectives: structural-functional and conflict.

Structural-Functional

The **structural-functional perspective**, also called *functionalism*, *assumes that all parts of the social structure (groups, organizations, and institutions), the culture (values and beliefs), and social processes (legislators working to create a law, an instructor teaching a child, or laws passed to bring about positive social change) work together to make the whole society run smoothly and harmoniously.* To understand the social world from this perspective, we must look at how the parts of society (structure) fit together and how each part contributes to the maintenance of society. For instance, two functions (purposes) of the family include having children and teaching them to be members of society. These and other functions help perpetuate society, for without reproducing and teaching new members to fit in, societies would collapse.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), the founder of the functionalist perspective, theorized that society is made up of necessary parts that fit together into a working whole. Durkheim believed that individuals conform to the rules of societies because of a *collective conscience*—the shared beliefs in the values of a group (Durkheim, [1895] 1982). People grow up sharing the same values, beliefs, and rules of behavior as those around them. Gradually, individuals internalize these shared beliefs and rules. A person's behavior is, in a sense, governed from within because it feels right and proper to behave in accordance with what is expected. So, researchers who use the functionalist perspective emphasize social consensus, which gives rise to stable and predictable patterns of order in society. Because people need groups for survival, they adhere to the group's rules so that they do not stand apart from it. This means that most societies run in an orderly manner, with most individuals acting for the benefit of society.

Functions (*consequences of an action or behavior*) can be manifest or latent. **Manifest functions** are *the planned outcomes of interactions, social organizations, or institutions.* Some of the planned consequences of the microwave oven, for instance, have been to allow people to prepare meals quickly and easily, facilitating life in overworked and stressed modern families. **Latent functions** are *unplanned or unintended consequences of actions or social structures* (Merton, 1938, [1942] 1973). Latent functions can be functional (helpful for the organization or society) or dysfunctional (bad for the organization or society). Functional actions contribute to the stability or equilibrium of society, whereas **dysfunctions** are *those actions that undermine the stability or equilibrium of society* (Merton, 1938). For example, by

allowing people to prepare meals without using a stove or conventional oven, the microwave oven has contributed to some people having no idea how to cook, thus making them highly dependent on processed foods and, in some cases, adding to problems of obesity.

Although the microwave oven and fast-food restaurants have had many benefits for a society in a hurry, one dysfunction is the deterioration of health, especially due to obesity.

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Sociologists who use a functionalist perspective believe that, to ensure harmony and stability in society, we must ensure that its parts work in functional, rather than dysfunctional, ways.

In summary, the structural-functional perspective

- examines the macro-level organizations and patterns in society;
- looks at what holds societies together and enhances social continuity;
- considers the consequences or *functions* of each major part of society;
- focuses on the way the structure, culture, and social processes work together to make society function smoothly; and
- notes manifest functions (which are planned), latent functions (which are unplanned or secondary), and dysfunctions (which undermine stability).

Critique of the Structural-Functional Perspective. Functionalism does not explain social changes in society, such as conflict and revolution. The functionalist assumption that if a system is stable it must be working well assumes that conflict and change are harmful. However, we know that stability may exist because of ruthless dictators suppressing people and government support for systems set up to benefit some at the cost of many (e.g., sexism, racism, **heterosexism**, ableism). In short, stability is not always good, and conflict signifies tensions—and sometimes injustices—in societies.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Describe a manifest and a latent function of the system of higher education in the United States today. Is the latent function dysfunctional? Why, or why not?

Conflict Perspective

In many ways, the conflict perspective turns functionalism on its head. The **conflict perspective** contends that *conflict is inevitable in any group or society* and that *inequality and injustice are the source of the conflicts that permeate society*. Resources and power are distributed unequally in society, so some members have more money, goods, and prestige than others. The rich protect their positions by using the power they have accumulated to keep others, like Hector and his family, in their places. Most of us want more of the resources in society (e.g., money, good jobs, education, nice homes, and cars), causing the possibility of conflict between the *haves* (those who control resources) and the *have-nots* (those who lack resources). These conflicts sometimes bring about changes in society.

Modern conflict theories have their origins in the works of Karl Marx (1818–1883), a German social philosopher who lived in England during the height of 19th-century industrial expansion. Capitalism had emerged as the dominant economic system in Europe. *Capitalism* is an economic system in which individuals and corporations, rather than the state, own and control the means of production (e.g., factories and information services like Meta). As they compete for profits, some win while others lose.

Marx recognized the plight of workers toiling in factories in the new industrial states of Europe and viewed the ruling elites and the wealthy industrial owners as exploiters of the working class. Marx wrote about the new working class crowded in urban slums, working long hours under appalling conditions without earning enough money for decent housing and food. Few of the protections enjoyed by many (but not all) workers today—such as retirement benefits, health coverage, sick leave, the 40-hour workweek, and restrictions against child labor—existed in Marx's time.

Marx believed that two classes, the capitalists (also referred to as the *bourgeoisie* or "haves"), who owned the **means of production** (*property, machinery, and other means of creating salable goods or services*), and the laborers working for the "haves" (also referred to as the *proletariat* or "have-nots") would continue to live in conflict until the workers shared more equally in the profits of their labor. The more workers came to understand their plight, the more aware they would become of the injustice of their situation. Eventually, Marx believed, workers would rise up and overthrow capitalism, forming a new, classless society. Collective ownership—shared ownership of the means of production—would be the new economic order (Marx & Engels, [1848] 1969).

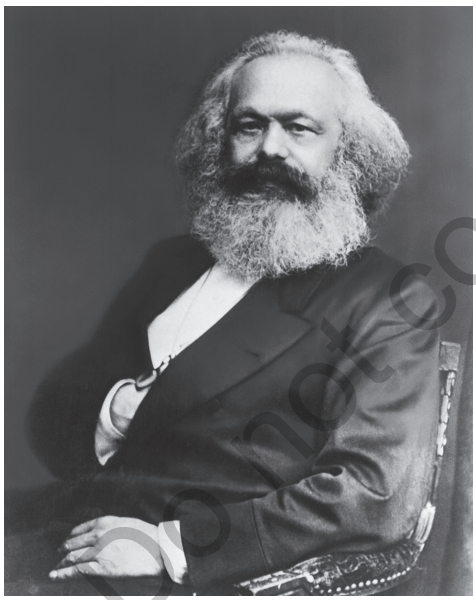
The idea of the bourgeoisie (the capitalist exploiters who own the factories) and the proletariat (the exploited workers who sell their labor) has carried over to analysis of modern-day conflicts among groups in society. For example, from a conflict perspective, Hector in Brazil and millions like him in other countries are part of the reserve labor force—a cheap labor pool that can be called on when labor is needed and disregarded when demand is low, thus meeting the changing labor needs of industry and capitalism. This pattern results in permanent economic insecurity and poverty for Hector and those like him.

Many different conflict theories have grown from the original ideas of Marx. Here, we mention four sociologists, Harriet Martineau ([1837] 1962), W. E. B. Du Bois ([1899] 1967), Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), and Lewis Coser (1956), who focused on social conflict in their sociological investigations.

Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), generally considered the first female sociologist, wrote several books that contribute to our understanding of modern sociological research methods and provided a critique of the failure of the United States to live up to its democratic principles, especially as they related to women. She argued that social laws influence social behavior and that societies can be measured on their social progress (including how much freedom they give to individuals and how well they treat the most oppressed members of society). Her work represents the foundation of current feminist and conflict theories (Martineau, 1838).

Another early American conflict theorist, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), was the first Black person to receive a doctorate from Harvard University. After being denied full-time positions at White universities, Du Bois founded a sociology program in 1898 at Atlanta University, a Black college. There,

Harriet Martineau published a critique of the United States' failure to live up to its democratic principles 11 years before Karl Marx's most famous work, but she was not taken seriously as a scholar for more than a century because she was a woman—the first feminist theorist.



Karl Marx is known as the founder of conflict theory.

he established a significant research center and trained a generation of Black social scientists. In 1899, he published *The Philadelphia Negro* (one of the first truly scientific studies in North America), and in 1903, he completed a classic sociological work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. His work was truly groundbreaking (A. Morris, 2015).

Du Bois, like other early sociological theorists, believed that while research should be scientifically rigorous and fair-minded, the ultimate goal of sociological work is social improvement—not just human insight. Throughout his life, Du Bois documented and lambasted the status of Black Americans, noting that Black people were an integral part of U.S. society but not fully accepted into it.

Du Bois helped establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He stressed the need for minority groups to become advocates for their rights—to object loudly when those in power act to disadvantage minorities—and to make society more just (Du Bois, [1899] 1967). He was—and continues to be—an inspiration for many sociologists who believe that their findings should be used to create a more humane social world.

A half-century later, in 1959, Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–2009) argued that society is always in the process of change and affected by forces that bring about change. Dahrendorf refined Marx's ideas in several ways. He pointed out that capitalism had survived, despite Marx's prediction of a labor revolt, because of improved conditions for workers (e.g., unions, the establishment of labor laws, and workplace regulations). Dahrendorf also maintained that instead of divisions being based on ownership, conflict had become based on authority.

Dahrendorf noted that those with lower-status positions (such as Hector) could form interest groups and engage in conflict with those in higher positions of authority. *Interest groups*, such as the members of Hector's *favela*, share a common situation or common interests. In Hector and his neighbors' case, these interests include a desire for sanitation, running water, electricity, jobs, and a higher standard of living. From within such interest groups, *conflict groups* arise to fight for changes. There is always potential for conflict when those without power realize their common position and form interest groups. How much change or violence is brought about depends on how organized those groups become.

Dahrendorf's major contribution is the recognition that conflict over resources results in a conflict not just between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie but among a multitude of interest groups, including old people versus young people, rich versus poor, one region of the country versus another, Christians versus non-Christians, and so forth. This acknowledges multiple rifts in society based on interest groups.

Whereas Marx emphasized the divisive nature of conflict, other theorists have offered a modified theory of conflict in society. For example, American theorist Lewis Coser argued that conflict can strengthen societies and the organizations within them. According to Coser, problems in a society or group lead to complaints or conflicts—a warning message to the group that all is not well. Resolution of the conflicts shows that the group is adaptable in meeting the needs of its members, thereby creating greater loyalty to the group. Thus, conflict provides the message of what is not working to meet people's needs, and the system may adapt to the needs for change because of the conflict (Coser, 1956; Simmel, [1922] 1955).

In summary, conflict theorists advance the following key ideas:

- Conflict and the potential for conflict underlie all social relations.
- Groups of people look out for their self-interest; they will try to obtain resources and make sure they are distributed primarily to members of their own group.
- Social change is desirable, particularly change that brings about a greater degree of social equality.
- The existing social order reflects powerful people imposing their values and beliefs on those with less power.

W. E. B. Du Bois continued the development of conflict theory and was among the first to apply that theory to U.S. society, especially to issues of race.

Critique of the Conflict Perspective. Those who use the conflict perspective generally focus on macro-level analysis and tend to lose sight of the individuals involved in conflict situations, such as Hector and his family. Also, they tend to focus on social stress, power dynamics, and disharmony while ignoring social cohesion and cooperation. Many critics of the conflict perspective argue that altruism and cooperation are common motivations in human behaviors.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Imagine you are a legislator. You must decide whether to cut funding for a senior citizens' program or slash a scholarship program for college students. You want to be reelected, and you know that approximately 90% of senior citizens are registered to vote, and most actually do vote. You also know that less than half of college-age people vote in most elections. These constituencies are about the same size. What would you do, and how would you justify your decision? How does this example illustrate Dahrendorf's conflict theory?

Multilevel Analysis

Many theorists try to bridge the gap between micro and macro levels of analysis, offering insights relevant at each level. We examine two of these next.

Max Weber's Contributions. Max Weber (1864–1920), a German-born social scientist, has had a lasting effect on sociology and other social sciences. Weber (pronounced *VAY-ber*) cannot be pigeonholed easily into one of the theoretical categories or one level of analysis, for his contributions include both micro- and macro-level analyses. His emphasis on *Verstehen* (meaning deep, empathetic understanding in humans) gives him a place in micro-level theory, and his discussions of power and bureaucracies give him a place in meso- and macro-level theory (Weber, 1946).

Verstehen stems from the interpretations or meanings individuals at the micro level give to their social experiences. Weber argued that to understand people's behaviors, you must step into their shoes and see the world as they do. Following in Weber's footsteps, sociologists try to understand both human behavior and the meanings people attach to their experiences. In this work, Weber is a micro theorist who set the stage for symbolic interaction theorists.

However, the goal-oriented, efficient new organizational form at the meso level called "bureaucracy" was the focus of much of Weber's writing. This organizational form is based on **rationality** (*the attempt to reach maximum efficiency with rules designed to accomplish goals*) rather than relying on long-standing

Patricia Hill Collins, an innovative feminist scholar, has challenged sociologists to look at the ways experiences of race, social class, gender, and sexuality intersect and reinforce one another.

Photo courtesy of Patricia Hill Collins

tradition for how things should be done. As we describe in Chapter 5, Weber's ideas about society at the meso level have laid the groundwork for a theoretical understanding of modern organizations.

Weber also attempted to understand macro-level processes. For instance, in his famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, [1904–1905] 1958), he asked how capitalists (those who have money and control production) understood the world around them. His work was influenced by Marx's writings, but whereas Marx focused on economic conditions as the key factor shaping history and power relations, Weber argued that Marx's focus was too narrow. Weber felt that politics, economics, religion, psychology, and people's ideas are interdependent—affecting each other. In short, Weber's understanding of society was more complex than Marx's vision of two economic groups competing for power.

Feminist Theory. Feminist theory also uses multilevel analysis and has foundations in the conflict perspective. **Feminist theory** *critiques the hierarchical power structures that disadvantage women and other minorities* (Cancian, 1992; Collins, 2008). Proponents note that men form an interest group intent on preserving their privileges. Feminists also argue that, historically, men have dominated sociology—like other sciences—providing a perspective that does not give a complete view of the social world.

Some branches of feminist theory come from interaction perspectives, emphasizing the way gender socialization, cues, and symbols shape the nature of many human interactions. Thus, feminist theory moves from macro-level analysis (e.g., looking at national and global situations that give privileges to men) to micro-level analysis (e.g., looking at inequality between husbands and wives in marriage). At every level, feminist theory points out how societies create gender roles and how these roles affect social patterns (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Lorber, 2009; Messerschmidt et al., 2018).

Realizing that gender influences people differently, based on their other roles in society (class position, race, sexual orientation, age, etc.), feminists use an intersectional approach to their research. Acknowledging intersectionality allows sociologists to study how individuals' multiple identities intersect and impact their lives and opportunities. For example, the experiences of White and Native American women, while they share the same gender, are very different and will influence how they each experience gender discrimination. Patricia Hill Collins, an important contemporary feminist scholar, examines the discrimination and oppression people face because of their race, class, gender, sexuality, or nationality, all of which are interconnected (Collins, 2008; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

To what extent are human beings free agents who can create their own social world and come up with their own ideas about how to live their lives? To what extent are our lives determined or influenced by the social systems around us and by our positions in the economic and political system? Is this different for different people? Why?

Using Different Theoretical Perspectives

Each of the theoretical perspectives described in this chapter begins from a set of assumptions about humans. Each makes a contribution to our understanding, but each has limitations or blind spots, such as not taking into account other levels of analysis. Table 2.3 gives a summary of cooperative versus competitive perspectives to provide another illustration of how the theories differ.

The strength of a theory depends on its ability to explain and predict behavior accurately. Each theoretical perspective focuses on a different aspect of society and level of analysis and gives us a different lens through which to view our social world. Depending on the questions we ask, different perspectives will be appropriate; the social world model helps us picture the whole system and determine which theories or perspectives best suit our needs in analyzing a specific social process or structure.

TABLE 2.3 ■ Cooperative Versus Competitive Perspectives

	Macro analysis	Micro analysis
Humans viewed as cooperative (people interact with others on the basis of shared meanings and common symbols)	Structural-functional perspective	Symbolic interaction perspective
Humans viewed as competitive (behavior governed by self-interest)	Conflict perspective (group interests)	Rational choice perspective (individual interests)

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Consider the issue of homelessness in cities around the world. How could each of the theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter be used to help us understand the problem of homelessness?

Middle-Range Theories

Middle-range theories provide explanations tied to specific aspects of social life, such as deviant behavior, racial prejudice, and civic engagement. More focused than theoretical perspectives, they provide a connection (the "middle-range") between abstract perspectives and the specific data we gather (Merton, 1968). These theories tend to fall under the umbrella of one of the four major theoretical perspectives described earlier and help us make sense of the patterns we notice with our sociological eye. For example, Erving Goffman, coming from a symbolic interactionist perspective, focused on the impact of **stigma** (*social disapproval that discredits a person's or group's claim to a "normal" identity*) in social interactions. His analysis of the impact of stigmas and the mid-range theory of social stigma he developed out of it provide one piece of the overall puzzle of explaining social interaction in society.

Theory and Research Methods

Scientists, including sociologists, often use theories to predict changes in society and the conditions under which they are likely to occur. Theory tells researchers what to look for and what concepts or variables they need to measure. However, explanations about the relationships between social variables need to be tested. This is where *research methods*—the procedures one uses to gather data—come into play. Data must be carefully gathered and then used to assess the accuracy of theory. If the data we find do not support a theory, we must reformulate or discard the theory. We use theory and methods together and they are interdependent.

To study Hector's life in Brazil, researchers might focus on the micro-level interactions between Hector and his family members, peers, teachers, and employers as factors that contribute to his situation. For example, one theory could be that Hector's family has socialized him to believe that certain activities (for example, working) are more realistic or immediately rewarding than others (such as attending school). A meso-level focus might examine the influence of the organizations and institutions—such as the business world, the schools, and the religious communities in Brazil—to see how they shape the forces that affect Hector's life. Alternatively, the focus might be on macro-level analysis—the class structure (rich to poor) of the society and the global forces, such as trade relations between Brazil and other countries, that influence opportunities for Brazilians who live in poverty.

Whatever the level of analysis, as social *scientists*, sociologists use scientific methods of gathering evidence to disprove or to support theories about society.

IDEAS UNDERLYING SCIENCE

Throughout most of human history, people came to "know" the world by the traditions passed down from one generation to the next. Things were so because authoritative people in the culture said they were so. Often, these explanations relied on magical, philosophical, or religious explanations of the

forces in nature. For example, less than 300 years ago, the conventional wisdom was that lightning storms were a sign of an angry god, not electricity caused by meteorological forces. As ways of knowing about the world shifted, tradition, religion, and magic as the primary means to understand the world were challenged. With advances in the natural sciences, observations of cause-and-effect processes became more systematic and controlled.

The scientific approach is based on several core ideas: First, there are real physical and social worlds that we can use science to study and understand. Second, there is a certain order to the world, with identifiable patterns that result from a series of causes and effects. The world is not merely a collection of unrelated random events; rather, events occur in a systematic sequence and in patterns—that is, they are *causally* related. Third, the way to gain knowledge of the world is to subject it to empirical testing. **Empirical knowledge** is *founded on information gained from evidence (facts) rather than intuition*. **Evidence** refers to *facts and observations that can be objectively observed and carefully measured using the five senses (sometimes enhanced by scientific instruments).*

Recognizing empirical knowledge is more important than ever in our era of "fake news." Keep this information in mind when you consider what politicians, religious, business, and other leaders say. Are their statements based on facts supported by scientific evidence? For knowledge to be scientific, it must come from phenomena that can be observed and measured.

Science is rooted in **objectivity**; that is, *one must take steps to ensure that one's personal opinions or values do not bias or contaminate data collection and analysis.* Scientists must not distort their research findings to promote a particular point of view. Social scientists, like all scientists, must explain what the data reveal, not what they wish the data would reveal. Researchers must be open to finding results that support *or* disprove their **hypothesis** (*an educated guess or prediction*) about the research being conducted. If their research findings show that their original assumptions were wrong, they must change their description of whatever they were studying, accordingly.

Failure to meet these standards—empirical knowledge, objectivity, and scientific evidence—means that a study is not scientific. Even if someone's ideas seem plausible and logical, they must be supported by systematically collected evidence. Sociologists deal with issues different from those pictured in detective or crime shows, but the same sort of concern for accuracy in gathering data guides their work. When sociologists establish theories as to why society works as it does, they must test those theories using scientific methods.

HOW SOCIOLOGISTS STUDY THE SOCIAL WORLD

Suppose you have a research question you want to answer such as, "Why do boys like Hector drop out of school?" For your research to be scientific, you must follow the basic steps of the scientific research process.

A. PLANNING A RESEARCH STUDY

- *Step 1:* Define a topic or problem that can be studied scientifically.
- *Step 2:* Review existing relevant research studies and theory to refine the topic and define **variables**, *concepts (ideas) that can vary in frequency of occurrence from one time, place, or person to another* (such as age, ethnicity, religion, and level of education).
- *Step 3:* Formulate hypotheses or research questions and determine how to define and measure the variables.

B. DESIGNING THE RESEARCH PLAN AND METHOD FOR COLLECTING THE DATA

- *Step 4:* Design the research plan that specifies how you will gather the data.
- Step 5*:* Select a **sample**, *a group of people who represent a much larger group to study.*
- *Step 6:* Collect the data using appropriate research methods.

C. MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA

- *Step 7:* Analyze the data and relate them to previous findings on the topic (from Step 2), revealing exactly what the study says about the research question(s) from Step 3.
- *Step 8:* Draw conclusions and present the report, including suggestions for future research and policy recommendations (if appropriate). The study is then ready for peer review—critique by other social scientists. Publicize findings and recommendations supported by the peer review.

Planning a Research Study

If you were to study Hector's situation, you would use Step 1 to define the topic or problem related to Hector that you will study, including the variables you will examine. Step 2 requires you to review past studies on related topics to see what has been done and how other researchers defined their variables. This review provides the basis for Step 3.

In Step 3, to formulate hypotheses, you must link concepts, such as poverty or dropping out of school, to specific measurements. For example, you could hypothesize that poverty is a major cause of *favela* teenagers dropping out of school because they need to earn money for their families. You might determine who is a dropout by using school records indicating whether that child has attended school during the past year. You could define poverty as having a low annual income—say, less than half of the average income for that size of family in the country—or by assessing ownership of property, such as cattle, automobiles, and indoor plumbing. It is important to be clear, precise, and consistent in how you define and measure your variables.

In order to conduct research to test a theory, you must formulate a hypothesis, a statement that can be tested to determine whether it is true. This is called *deductive research*. It starts with a theory that you then test. For example, you might examine whether poverty causes poor boys like Hector to drop out of school. *Inductive research*, on the other hand, starts with observations that then lead to hypothesis development and, potentially, theory formation. If you use inductive research, you make an observation and then begin to collect more data to determine whether what you witnessed initially was a social pattern. For example, if you noticed Hector's friends pressure him to drop out of school, you may want to interview other dropouts to see if their friends influenced their decisions to leave school. Once you start to notice social patterns, you can begin to analyze those patterns using appropriate existing theories or creating a new theory if existing ones do not provide explanations.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Think of a research question based on a theoretical perspective. For example, you might use a micro-level theory to ask how Hector's peers affect his decisions. Then write a hypothesis, and identify your variables in the hypothesis.

Correlation and Causality

Whether you use inductive or deductive research, you must always carefully define your variables and determine how they interact with and relate to one another. **Correlation** refers to a relationship between variables (such as poverty and low levels of education) with change in one variable associated with change in another. Once we have determined that there is a correlation between two variables, we need to take the next step: analyzing which comes first and seeing if one variable causes change in another.

Cause-and-effect relationships *occur when there is a relationship between variables so that one variable stimulates a change in another* (as seen in Figure 2.1). The **independent variable** is *the variable in a cause-and-effect relationship that comes first in a time sequence and causes a change in another variable*—the **dependent variable**. If we hypothesize that poverty causes Hector and others to drop out of school,

poverty is the independent variable in this hypothesis and dropping out of school is the dependent variable, dependent on the level of poverty. In determining cause and effect, the independent variable must always precede the dependent variable in the time sequence if we want to try to determine whether the independent variable causes a change in the dependent variable.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Cause and Effect

Designing the Research Plan and Method for Collecting the Data

Researchers must always make clear how they collect their data. Every research study should be replicable—capable of being repeated—by other researchers, so social scientists must give enough information to ensure that another researcher could repeat the study and compare results.

The appropriate data collection method depends on the level(s) of analysis of the research question (micro, meso, or macro) the researcher asks. For example, if you want to answer a macro-level research question, such as the effect of poverty on students dropping out of school in Brazil, you should focus on large-scale social and economic data sources, such as the Brazilian census. To learn about micro-level issues, such as the influence of peers on an individual's decision to drop out of school, you will need to examine small-group interactions at the micro level. Table 2.4 illustrates the different levels of analysis.

TABLE 2.4 ■ The Social World Model and *Levels of Analysis*

Micro Level	
Individual	Hector
Small group	Hector's family and close friends
Local community	The *favela*; Hector's local school, church, and neighborhood organizations
Meso Level	
Organizations	Brazilian corporations, the Catholic Church, and the local school system in Brazil
Institutions	Family; education; political, economic, and health systems in the region or the nation of Brazil
Ethnic subcultures	Native peoples, African Brazilians
Macro Level	
National society	Social policies, trends, and programs in Brazil
Global community of nations	The status of Brazil in the global economy; trade relations with other countries; programs of international organizations or corporations

Designing the Research Plan

Step 4 is vitally important because the researcher evaluates the various methods used to collect data for research studies and selects one or more that are appropriate for the research question. These include questionnaires, interviews, observational studies, secondary data analysis, content analysis, and experiments. Some methods produce *quantitative* (numerical) data, whereas others supply *qualitative* (non-numerical) data, such as individuals' responses to interviews. Questionnaires and secondary data analysis tend to be quantitative and used when conducting macro- and meso-level studies. Interviews, observational studies, and content analysis usually produce qualitative data or a blend of quantitative and qualitative data and are primarily used for micro-level research. Some studies include both quantitative and qualitative data.

Interviews are *research conducted by talking directly with people and asking questions in person or by telephone.* Structured interviews consist of an interviewee asking respondents a set list of questions with a choice of set answers. Unstructured and semi-structured interviews, which allow respondents to answer questions in a more open-ended manner, allow for follow-up and additional questions as they evolve in response to what the researcher learns as the research progresses.

Questionnaires contain *questions and other types of items designed to solicit information appropriate to analysis of research questions*. They are convenient for collecting large amounts of data because they can be distributed to many respondents at once (in person or via phone, mail, or online).

Observational studies (also called field research) involve *systematic, planned observation and recording of interactions and other human behavior in their natural settings* (where the activity normally takes place, rather than in a laboratory). They can take different forms: (1) observations in which the researcher participates in the activities of the group being studied or (2) observations in which the researcher observes or records the group's activity without participating in it. It is important for observers to avoid influencing or altering group functioning and interaction by their presence.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

If you were trying to compare how effectively two professors teach a research methods course offered in your department, what variables might you use, and what variables might you need to control? How would you set up your study? What methods would you use?

Secondary analysis uses *existing data, information already collected in other studies—including data banks, such as the national census*. Often, large data-collecting organizations, such as the United Nations or a country's census bureau, the national education department, or a private research organization, will make data available for researchers to use. Consider the question of the dropout rate in Brazil. Researchers can learn a great deal about the behavior of school dropouts, as a group, from analysis of information gathered by ministries or departments of education. Likewise, if we want to compare modern dropout rates with those of an earlier time, we may find data from previous decades to be invaluable. Secondary analysis can be an excellent way to do meso- or macro-level studies that reveal large-scale patterns in the social world.

Census workers collect questionnaires in the United States and many other countries every 10 years. When necessary, they go door to door to ensure every household participates.

Nature and Science/Alamy Stock Photo

Content analysis entails *the systematic categorizing and recording of information from written or recorded sources—printed materials, videos, radio broadcasts, or artwork*. With content analysis (a common method in historical research and the study of organizations), sociologists can gather the data they need from various materials—books, magazines, newspapers, laws, letters, comments on websites, emails, videos, archived radio broadcasts, or even artwork. They develop a coding system to classify the source content. A researcher trying to understand shifts in Brazilian attitudes toward youth poverty in *favelas* could do a content analysis of popular magazines to see how many pages or stories they devoted to child poverty in the Brazilian media in each decade from the 1960s to the present. Content analysis has the advantage of being relatively inexpensive and easy to do. It is also unobtrusive, meaning that the researcher does not influence the participants being investigated by having direct

contact with them. Furthermore, examining materials in historical sequence can be effective in recognizing patterns over time.

In **experiments**, *researchers control all variables except one so that they can study the effects of that variable*. An experiment usually requires an **experimental group**, *in which the researcher exposes subjects in the group to one variable*; this process is to test the effects of that variable on human behavior, and a **control group**, *in which the subjects are not exposed to the variable the researcher wants to test*. The control group provides a baseline to which the researcher can compare the experimental group. Psychologists use lab experiments, but few sociologists use this method because many sociological questions cannot be studied in controlled settings. For example, Hector's environment in the *favela* cannot be studied in a laboratory setting.

Control and experimental research projects outside of a lab setting are more common among sociologists. For example, researchers may want to determine whether a new teaching method using technology might help children from Hector's *favela*. Researchers can do so by comparing a control group, exposed to the usual teaching method, and an experimental group provided with the new method or experimental technology. We must ensure that the control and experimental groups of children are at the same academic level and that the teachers are equally motivated and prepared when teaching both classes. With this carefully designed research project, we can conclude that the new approach increases learning if the children in the experimental group score significantly higher on the final exam than those in the control group.

Triangulation refers to *the use of two or more methods of data collection to enhance the amount and type of data for analysis and the accuracy of the findings*. To study Hector's situation, a research study could use macro-level quantitative data on poverty and on educational statistics in Brazil and micro-level interviews with Hector and his peers to determine their goals and their attitudes toward education. If all findings point to the same conclusion, the researcher can feel much more confident about the study results.

Selecting a Sample

It would be impossible to interview or send a questionnaire to every school dropout in Brazil to determine why the teenage dropout rate is so high. It is possible to study a portion of that population, however. In Step 5, the research design process includes determining how to make sure the study includes people who are typical—that is, representative—of the total group (or population) about which you want to learn. This involves careful selection of a *sample*, a group systematically chosen to represent a much larger group.

Researchers use many types of samples. A common one, the representative sample, attempts to accurately reflect the group being studied so that the sample results can be generalized, or applied to the larger group or population. In the case of studying why so many boys from Hector's *favela* drop out of school, a representative sample for a study could be drawn from all 13- to 16-year-olds in his region or city in Brazil.

The most common form of representative sample is the *random sample*. All people in the population being studied have an *equal chance* of being selected for the study. By observing or talking with this smaller group selected from the total population under study, the researcher can get an accurate picture of the total population and have confidence that the findings apply to the larger group. Developing an effective sampling technique is often a complex process. In the case of Brazil, people constantly move in and out of the *favela*. Those who have just arrived may not have the same characteristics as those who have been living there a long time, but it is important to have a sample that represents the whole group being studied. Samples also must be large enough to accurately represent a population and to use statistical programs to analyze the data. If you take a methods course, you will delve further into these details of sampling and data analysis discussed next.

Collecting the Data

You now know how to make a research plan, select your method of collecting data, and select a sample representative of the population you want to study. In Step 6, you enact your research plan and collect data.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Define and provide an example of each of the following important research concepts:

cause-and-effect relationships

spurious relationships

evidence

correlation

dependent variable

independent variable

hypothesis

sample

triangulation

Now think of a question you would like to research. How would each research concept relate to your research question—or not?

Making Sense of the Data

Once you collect your data from your sample, you must analyze them.

Analyzing the Data

In Step 7, the researchers use statistical and other techniques to analyze what the data say in answering the research question. Imagine that you have 100 interviews from residents of Hector's *favela*, plus a notebook full of field observation notes from "hanging out" with the youth there. What do you do with the data? Social researchers use multiple techniques to analyze data, but whatever techniques they use, they look for patterns in the data and then use theories and findings from past research on the topic to make sense of those patterns.

Presenting the Findings

During Step 8, you draw conclusions and present the final report. The report includes a discussion of the results indicating whether the data supports the hypothesis or answers the research question, relates them to previous research, and (if appropriate) makes recommendations on how to use the findings. This report is usually reviewed by other social scientists who provide feedback. After this step (if it holds up to peer review) you should make your findings public.

Ethical Issues in Social Research

What happens if a scientist conducts research that has negative impacts on the participants? This concern has prompted most universities and other research organizations to have *human subjects review boards*. The boards review research plans and methods to be sure they will *not* hurt the subjects. Of special concern are research projects in medical sciences that could possibly have negative physical affects, but social scientists must also have their research reviewed.

Sociologists and other scientists are bound by the ethical codes of conduct governing research. The American Sociological Association (ASA) code of ethics outlines standards that researchers are expected to observe when doing research, teaching, and publishing. They include

- explaining the uses and consequences of the research and gaining informed consent from respondents;
- taking steps to ensure the privacy of respondents;

- being objective, reporting findings and sources fully;
- making no promises to respondents that cannot be honored;
- accepting no support that requires violation of these principles;
- completing contracted work; and
- delineating responsibilities in works with multiple authors.

Examples of unethical research include studying people without their knowledge or consent, including only data that support the results you would like to see, and violating the confidentiality of your subjects by revealing their identities. The bottom line is that researchers must do everything they can to protect their subjects from harm.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Describe the pros and cons of each of these approaches to gathering data in sociology, and identify a potential ethical problem in each approach:

- experiments
- observational studies
- interviews
- questionnaires
- content analysis
- secondary analysis

Putting Sociology to Work: Public Sociology

Most early sociologists—including Lester Ward, the first president of the ASA—promoted sociology as a means for improving society (Calhoun, 2007). As the discipline of sociology grew from its early days and became an acknowledged social science, some sociologists advocated for "pure" research disconnected from social policy issues and the public sphere. Throughout the history of the discipline, sociologists have debated their proper role in society.

Today many sociologists believe that, in addition to pure research, good social science has practical implications, including evaluating and formulating program and policies. There is a movement to recall the roots of sociology and make sociology more *public*—that is, of use to society. **Public sociologists** *use sociological tools to understand and inform citizens about how society works and to improve society.* Some help create and advocate for social policies that their research indicates will have a positive impact on society. Public sociologists—whether professors or those in a variety of professions outside academia—share a common goal: to better understand how society operates and to make practical use of their sociological findings to better society.

Some public sociologists work outside of academia and use sociological knowledge and research skills to address organizational needs or problems in government, education, health care settings, social service agencies, and businesses. They work for clients or organizations that often determine the research questions they will address. Depending on their positions, they may be known as sociological practitioners, applied sociologists, clinical sociologists, policy analysts, program planners, or evaluation researchers, among other titles. They focus on pragmatic ways to improve organizations or society, sometimes recommending major changes and sometimes suggesting modest policy proposals.

So far, we have focused on what sociology is and how sociologists know what they know and do the research they do. The rest of the book examines our social world as informed by methods and theory discussed in this chapter. The next chapter explores how you can understand your culture and society at various levels of analysis in our social world.

ENGAGING SOCIOLOGY

HOW TO READ A RESEARCH TABLE

A statistical table is a researcher's labor-saving device. Quantitative data presented in tabular form are clearer and more concise than the same information presented in several written paragraphs. A good table has clear signposts to help the reader avoid confusion. For instance, Figure 2.2 includes a table that shows many of the main features of a table, and the boxes in the margins explain how to read each feature.

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics: 2017, for Persons 25 Years Old and Over, Reported in Thousands

HEADNOTE (or subtitle): Many tables will have a headnote or subtitle under the title, giving information relevant to understanding the table or units in the table.

For this table, the reader is informed that it includes all persons over the age of 25 and the units are reported in thousands.

TITLE: The title provides information on the major topic and variables in the table.

"Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics: 2017"

▼ TABLE 2.1

Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics: 2017, for Persons 25 Years Old and Over, Reported in Thousands

Characteristic	Population (1,000)	Percentage of Population—Highest Level					
		Not a High School Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College but No Degree	Associate's Degree[1]	Bachelor's Degree	Advanced Degree
Total persons	216,921	10.4	29	16.3	10.4	21.3	12.9
Age							
25–34 yrs old	44,250	7.8	26.1	18.4	10.4	25.7	11.6
35–54 yrs old	82,072	10.1	27	15.3	11.2	22.5	14.3
55 yrs and older	90,599	12.2	32	16.3	9.6	18.1	12.2

MARGINAL TABS: In examining the numbers in the table, try working from the outside in. The marginals, the figures at the margins of the table, often provide summary information.

In this table, the first column of numbers is headed "Population (1,000)," indicating (by thousands) the total number of people in each category who were part of the database. The columns to the right indicate—by percentages—the level of educational attainment for each category.

HEADINGS AND STUBS: Tables generally have one or two levels of headings under the title and headnotes. These instruct the reader about what is in the columns below.

In this table, the headings indicate the level of education achieved so that the reader can identify the percentage with a specified level of education.

The table also has a stub: the far-left column under "Characteristic." This lists the items that are being compared according to the categories found in the headings. In this case, the stub indicates age, sex, and race/ethnicity.

CELLS: To make more detailed comparisons, examine specific cells in the body of the table. These are the boxes that hold the numbers or percentages.

In this table, the cells contain data on educational achievement by age, sex, and race/ethnicity (for Asians, Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics).

▼ TABLE 2.1

Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics: 2017, for Persons 25 Years Old and Over, Reported in Thousands (Continued)

Characteristic	Percentage of Population—Highest Level						
	Population (1,000)	Not a High School Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College but No Degree	Associate's Degree[1]	Bachelor's Degree	Advanced Degree
Sex							
Male	104,325	10.9	30	16.2	9.3	21	12.7
Female	112,597	10	28	16.6	11.4	21.6	13.1
Race/Ethnicity							
Asian	13,183	9	20	9.4	6.3	30.5	24.3
White[2]	171,046	10	30	16.1	10.5	21.8	12.7
Black[2]	26,455	12.6	33	20.1	10.3	15.1	8.8
Hispanic	32,660	29.5	31	14.5	8.1	12.2	5.1

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2017).
[1]Includes vocational degrees.
[2]For persons who selected this race group only.
Features of the table adapted from Broom and Selznick (1963).

UNITS: Units refer to how the data are reported. They could be in percentages, in number per 100 or 1,000, or in other units.

In this table, the data are reported first in raw number in thousands and then in percentages.

FACTS FROM THE TABLE: After reviewing all this information, the reader is ready to make some interpretations about what the data mean.

In this table, the reader might note that young adults are more likely to have a college education than older citizens, though those in the middle age bracket are more likely to have graduate degrees. In addition, people with Asian backgrounds have the highest levels of education. What other interest in patterns do you see?

SOURCE: The source note, found under the table, points out the origin of the data. It is usually identified by the label "Source."

Under this table, the source note says "U.S. Census Bureau 2017)."

FOOTNOTES: Some tables have footnotes, usually indicating something unusual about the data or where to find more complete data.

In this table, two footnotes are provided so that the reader does not make mistakes in interpretation.

Features of the table adapted from Broom and Selznick (1963).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2017c).

[1] Includes vocational degrees.

[2] For persons who selected this race group only.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Theories serve as lenses to help us create research questions and to make sense of the data we gather using various research strategies. Sociologists also use data to test the theories, so there is an ongoing reciprocal relationship between theory (the lens for making sense of the data) and research (the evidence used to test the theories). The most important ideas in this chapter concern what sociology considers data or evidence and how sociology is a science. These ideas form the framework for the content of sociology.

The core features of scientific research are a commitment to: (a) using the scientific method to collect, analyze, and understand data; (b) following the data rather than our preconceived ideas; and (c) continual openness to others reexamining our work and offering new interpretations. We must always consider the possibility that our own social situations and experiences have led us to overlook other areas of research and explanations for the data we study.

Science—including social science—does not consist of just facts to be memorized. Science is a process made possible by a social exchange of ideas, a clash of opinions, and a continual search for truth. Knowledge in the sciences is created by vigorous debate. We hope you will engage in the creation of knowledge by entering into these debates.

- Attempts to understand society have existed for at least two-and-a-half millennia, but gathering scientific evidence to test hypotheses and validate claims is a modern idea.
- Theories are especially important to science because they raise questions for research, and they explain the relationships among facts. Sociology has four primary theoretical perspectives or paradigms: symbolic interaction, rational choice, structural-functionalism, and conflict. Other perspectives, such as the feminist perspective, serve as correctives to the main paradigms. Most of these theoretical perspectives are more applicable either at the micro to meso level or at the meso to macro level.
- Sociology is a science used to study society, and therefore it is essential to understand what are—and what are not—considered data or evidence. Ideas must be tested empirically—that is, scientifically.
- As social scientists, sociologists use eight systematic steps to gather data and test theories about the social world.
- The independent variable in a cause-and-effect relationship is the variable that comes first in a time sequence and causes a change in the other variable—the dependent variable.
- Major methods for gathering data in sociology include questionnaires, interviews, observational studies, secondary data analysis, content analysis, and experiments.
- Quantitative data come in the form of numbers (e.g., derived from questionnaires or some secondary sources such as the census), and qualitative data come in non-numerical forms (e.g., derived from semi-structured and unstructured interviews or observational studies).
- The use of multiple methods—triangulation—increases confidence in the findings.
- Scientific confidence in results requires representative samples of the population studied.
- Responsible research requires sensitivity to the ethics of research—ensuring that gathering scientific data does no one harm.
- Public sociologists use sociological tools to understand and inform citizens about how society operates and to improve society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you were to examine the relationship between the government and the economy in the United States today, which of the four major theoretical perspectives outlined in the chapter would be most helpful? Why?
2. Imagine you would like to conduct a sociological study of the students with whom you attended fourth grade to determine what key factors influenced their academic achievements. Which of the four major theoretical perspectives would you employ in your study? Why?
3. Why do research questions have to be asked in a precise way? Give an example of a precise research question. How do precise questions make it possible for you to test and measure your topic?
4. Sociologists must be continually open to having their findings reexamined and new interpretations proposed. Describe a time when you changed your mind due to new information. Was it difficult for you to change your mind? Why, or why not?
5. Why is the ability to be open to new ideas and interpretations so vital to the scientific perspective? Do you think you could carry out this aspect of the scientific process successfully—no matter how you feel about a topic? Why, or why not?
6. If you were to conduct a study to measure student satisfaction with a particular academic department on campus, what research method(s) would you use? Why? How would the method(s) you select vary according to (a) the size of the department and (b) the type of information you sought?

KEY TERMS

cause-and-effect relationships
conflict perspective
content analysis
control group
correlation
dependent variable
dysfunctions
empirical knowledge
evidence
experimental group
experiments
feminist theory
functions
heterosexism
hypothesis
independent variable
interviews
latent functions
laws
manifest functions
means of production
objectivity
observational studies
public sociologists
questionnaires
rational choice perspective
rationality
roles
sample
secondary analysis
stigma
structural-functional perspective
symbolic interaction perspective
symbols
theoretical perspective
theories
triangulation
variables

CONTRIBUTING TO OUR SOCIAL WORLD: WHAT CAN WE DO?

At the Local (Micro) Level

- *Local service organizations* are found in every community and work to provide for the unmet needs of community members: housing, legal aid, medical care, elder care, and so on. United Way works with most local service organizations and may be able to let you know which ones need help in your area. Volunteer to work with an organization in its applied needs assessment research, and practice the sociological principles and research methods described in this chapter. If your college or university has a service learning office, it will offer connections to many service opportunities, sometimes linked to specific fields of study. Many colleges and universities also offer academic service learning credit in which course assignments include such community work under the supervision of the instructor.

At the Organizational or Institutional (Meso) Level

- *State agencies* often have ongoing projects to gather data for more accurate information about the state and the needs of its citizens. Go to your state government's website to find volunteer opportunities through your state government.

At the National or Global (Macro) Level

- *The U.S. Census Bureau* is best known for its decennial (every 10 years) enumeration of the population, but its work continues each year as it prepares special reports, population estimates, and regular publications (including *Current Population Reports*). Visit the bureau's website and explore the valuable and extensive quantitative data and other information available. Visit your local Census Bureau office, or go to their website, to see how the U.S. Census helps communities and how you can engage with the Census Bureau.