1 TAKING A NEW LOOK AT A FAMILIAR WORLD

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1.1 Describe the relationships between individuals and society.

1.2 Explain how the sociological imagination enhances our perspective of everyday life.

André graduated from college in June 2023 about 3 years after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the worst global public health crisis in a century. He had always been a model student. When he wasn't studying, he found time to help kids read at the local elementary school and actively participated in student government at his university. He got along well with his professors, his grades were excellent, he made the dean's list all 4 years, and he graduated Phi Beta Kappa. As a computer science major with a minor in economics, André thought his future was set: He would land a job at a top software company or perhaps a Wall Street brokerage firm and work his way up the ladder so that he'd be earning a six-figure income by the time he was 30.

But when André entered the job market and began applying for the jobs he'd seen advertised, things didn't go exactly according to plan. Despite his credentials, nobody seemed willing to hire him full time. He was able to survive by taking temporary freelance programming jobs here and there, waiting tables in a small restaurant in his hometown, and driving a couple of nights a week for Uber. Although he felt he was qualified for the jobs to which he'd applied, André began to doubt his own abilities: "Do I lack the skills employers are looking for? Am I not trying hard enough? What the heck is wrong with me?" His friends and family were as encouraging as they could be, but some secretly wondered if André wasn't as smart as they'd thought he was.

Michael and Grace were both juniors at a large university. They had been dating each other exclusively for 2 years. By all accounts, the relationship seemed to be going quite well. In fact, Michael often thought about marriage, children, and living happily ever after. Then one day out of the blue, Grace dropped a bombshell. She texted Michael that she thought their relationship was going nowhere and perhaps they ought to start seeing other people.

Michael was stunned. "What did I do???" he texted her. "I thought things were going great. Is it something I said? Something I did? Tell me. I can change."

She said no, he hadn't done anything wrong; they had simply grown apart. She told him she just didn't feel as strongly about him as she used to.

Even though he let his friends talk him into immediately changing his relationship status on social media, Michael was devastated. They tried to comfort him. "She wasn't any good for you anyway," they said. "We always thought she was a little creepy. What kind of monster ends a relationship via text anyway? She probably couldn't be in a serious relationship with anybody. It wasn't your fault; it was hers."

In both of these stories, notice how people immediately try to explain an unfortunate situation by focusing on the personal characteristics and attributes of the individuals involved. André blames himself for not being able to land a job in his field; others, although supportive, have reservations about his intelligence and drive. Michael wonders which one of his flaws had soured his relationship with Grace; his friends blame Grace, even questioning her psychological stability. Such reactions are not uncommon. When it comes to understanding big events in people's lives, we have a marked tendency to rely on an **individualistic explanation**, attributing people's achievements and disappointments to their personal qualities.

So why can't André, our highly capable, well-trained college graduate, find a permanent job? It's certainly possible that he has some personal weakness that makes him unemployable: lack of motivation, laziness, negative attitude, bad hygiene, a snooty demeanor, and so on. Or maybe he just doesn't come across as particularly smart during job interviews.

But by focusing exclusively on such individual "deficiencies," we risk overlooking the broader societal and economic factors that no doubt affected André's job prospects. Although the economy came roaring back in the 2 years after the pandemic almost completely shut it down, jobs for college graduates were not as plentiful as some assumed they would be. The unemployment rate for new college graduates with a bachelor's degree increased from 8.6% to 12.3% between 2022 and 2023. In fact, the unemployment rate for recent college graduates is actually *higher* than the overall unemployment rate, which is currently about 3.8% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024a).

One of the key reasons for this discrepancy is the fact that job openings are not distributed equally throughout the labor market. The industries that had the most employment openings when André graduated—such as restaurants, hotels, day care facilities, and nursing homes—didn't offer the types of jobs recent graduates wanted. Meanwhile, the areas of employment for which he and other graduates were suited—tech consulting, finance, media—continued to announce layoffs and many firms reconsidered their hiring plans (cited in Bhattari, 2023). Not surprisingly, the rate of *under*employment (the proportion of people who work in jobs that do not require the skills they have) is significantly higher among those who graduated in the past few years (40%) than the rate for college graduates in general (33%; Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2024).

It seemed that for people like André a college degree—once believed to be the golden ticket to a solid career—wasn't providing the sort of employment advantage it used to. And as if all this wasn't bad enough, college graduates today are saddled with unprecedented levels of student debt. Nearly 44 million Americans have student loan debt to the tune of $1.7 trillion. Those who graduated in the past few years carry an average debt of $38,000 (Rivera, 2023).

In fact, Americans owe $600 billion *more* in student loan debt than is owed on the total U.S. credit card debt (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2023).

So you see, André's employability in his chosen field and his chances of earning a good living were as much a result of the social, economic, and global health forces operating at the time he began looking for a job as of any of his personal qualifications. Had he graduated 5 years earlier—when employment opportunities were relatively plentiful—his prospects would have been much brighter. In fact, even if he graduated *1 year* earlier, as the economy was in the midst of a dramatic recovery and some employers were struggling to find enough people to fill their job openings, he would have faced fewer obstacles to his employment.

And what about Michael and Grace? It seems perfectly reasonable to conclude that something about either of them or the unfortunate combination of their personalities caused their breakup. We tend to view dating relationships—not to mention marriages—as successes or failures based solely on the traits or actions of the two people involved.

But how would your assessment of the situation change if you found out that Lee—to whom Grace had always been secretly attracted—had just broken up with his longtime girlfriend, Julie, and was now available? Like it or not, relationships are not exclusively private entities; they're always being influenced by forces beyond our control. They take place within a larger network of people—friends, acquaintances, ex-partners, coworkers, fellow students, and individuals as yet unknown—who may make desirable or, at the very least, acceptable dating partners. On social media, people routinely post up-to-the-minute changes in the status of their relationships, thereby instantaneously advertising shifts in their availability.

When people believe they have no better romantic alternative, they tend to stay with their present partners, even if they are not particularly satisfied. When people think that better relationship options exist, they may become less committed to staying in their present ones. Indeed, people's perceptions of what characterizes a good relationship (such as fairness, compatibility, or affection) are less likely to determine when and if it ends than the presence or absence of favorable alternatives (Felmlee et al., 1990). Research shows that the risk of a relationship ending increases as the supply of potential alternative relationships increases (South & Lloyd, 1995).

Grace's decision to leave could have been indirectly affected by the sheer number of potentially datable partners—a result of shifts in the birthrate 20 years or so earlier. There are roughly 126 U.S. men between 25 and 34 who are single, divorced, or widowed for every 100 women in the same categories (Parker et al., 2014). For a single, straight woman like Grace, such a surplus of college-age men increases the likelihood that she would eventually find a better alternative to Michael. Fifty years ago, however, when there were 180 single men for every 100 single women, her chances would have been even better. The number of available alternatives can also vary geographically. For instance, Michael's prospects would improve if he were living in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where there are 72 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women, but his chances would sink if he lived in Mansfield, Ohio, where there are 215 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends, 2014). In sum, Michael's interpersonal value, and therefore the stability of his relationship with Grace, may have suffered not because of anything he did but because of population forces over which he had little, if any, control.

Let's take this notion beyond Grace and Michael's immediate dating network. For instance, the very characteristics and features that people consider desirable (or undesirable) in the first place reflect the values of the larger culture in which they live. Fashions and tastes are constantly changing, making particular characteristics (hairstyle, physique, clothing tastes), behaviors (smoking, drinking, sharing feelings), or life choices (educational attainment, occupation, political affiliation, COVID-19 vaccine status) more or less attractive. And broad economic forces can affect intimate choices even further. In China, where there are about 41 million more unmarried young men than women (Tsai, 2012a), single women can be especially choosy when it comes to romantic partners, often requiring that suitors be employed and own a home before they'll even consider them for a date (Jacobs, 2011).

The moral of these two stories is simple: To understand experiences in our personal lives, we must move past individual traits and examine broader societal characteristics and trends. But it doesn't take a once-in-a-lifetime social event like a deadly global pandemic to determine the trajectory of our everyday lives. All sorts of external features that are beyond our immediate awareness and control exert an influence on the circumstances of our day-to-day lives. We can't begin to explain an individual's employability without examining current and past economic trends that affect the number of jobs available and the number of people who are looking for work. We can't begin to explain why relationships work or don't work without addressing the broader interpersonal network and culture in which they are embedded. By the same token, we can't begin to explain people's ordinary, everyday thoughts and actions without examining the social forces that influence them.

SOCIOLOGY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Herein lies the fundamental theme of **sociology**—the systematic study of human societies—and the theme that will guide us throughout this book: Everyday social life—our thoughts, actions, feelings, decisions, relationships, and so on—is the product of a complex interplay between societal forces and personal characteristics. To explain why people are the way they are, believe the things they believe, or do the things they do, we must understand the interpersonal, historical, cultural, technological, organizational, and global environments they inhabit. To understand either individuals or society, we must understand both (Mills, 1959).

Of course, seeing the relationship between individual people and broader social forces is not always so easy. The United States is a society built on the image of the rugged, self-reliant individual. Not surprisingly, it is also a society dominated by individualistic understandings of human behavior that seek to explain problems and processes by focusing exclusively on the character, the psychology, or even the biochemistry of each person. Consequently, most of us simply take for granted that what we choose to do, say, feel, and think are private phenomena. Everyday life seems to be a series of free personal choices. After all, you choose what to major in, what to wear when you go out, what and when to eat, whom your romantic partner will be, and so on.

But how free are these decisions? Think about all the times your life has been dictated or at least influenced by social circumstances over which you had little control. Have you ever felt that because of your age, gender, or race, certain opportunities were closed to you? Your ability to legally drive a car, drink alcohol, vote, or rent an apartment, for instance, is determined by society's prevailing definition of age. When you're older, you may be forced into retirement

despite your skills and desire to continue working. Gender profoundly affects your choices too. Some occupations, such as bank executive and engineer, are still overwhelmingly occupied by men, whereas others, such as registered nurse and preschool teacher, are almost exclusively filled by women. Likewise, the doctrines of your religion may limit your behavioral choices. For a devout Catholic, premarital sex or even divorce is unlikely. Each day during the holy month of Ramadan, a strict Muslim must abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. An Orthodox Jew would never dream of drinking milk and eating meat at the same meal. Even universal bodily needs can be influenced by our social context.

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION

A SOCIOLOGY OF SLEEP

Everybody sleeps. At certain moments in our lives—when we've pulled an all-nighter studying for finals, when we're congested and feverish, when we become new parents—sleep may be the most all-encompassing preoccupation we have. Indeed, one of the major ailments of modern life is lack of sleep. According to the National Council on Aging (Marshall, 2024), about 30% of Americans have trouble sleeping and about 38% of adults under the age of 65 get fewer than 7 hours of sleep per night. About 1 in 7 Americans report feeling tired or exhausted most days. In the United States alone, there are over 2,500 sleep clinics to treat people's sleep problems. "Fatigue management" is now a growing therapeutic field (National Sleep Foundation, 2024).

But sleep preferences are not just a matter of individual adaptation and life choices. Some of the most important indicators for poor sleep in the United States are low income, shift work, food insecurity, and the stress that comes with being a person of color (Heller, 2018). The highest rates of short sleep duration (that is, the number of people who get fewer than 7 hours of sleep a night) can be found in states with high rates of economic instability, such as Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Alabama (Marshall, 2024).

All societies must organize the sleep of their members in some way. In contemporary U.S. society, we tend to believe that "lying unconscious for eight hours straight [belongs] to a natural order" (Barron, 2016, p. 27). But the "8 hours of sleep a night" ideal is arbitrary and has not always characterized people's lived experiences. Up until the mid-19th century, it was common for people to sleep in segments throughout the day. They may have gone to bed in the late afternoon or early evening, slept for several hours, woken up and engaged in a few hours of activity—what the French referred to as *dorveille*, or "wakesleep"—then gone to bed for a "second sleep." In some societies, periods of daytime sleep are a common part of the culture. The *siesta* in some Latin American and Mediterranean countries and the midday rest in some Asian societies are held as acceptable, even valued, practices.

However, such a pattern was not (and today is not) conducive to a complex, global world that hinges on employment and profit. For years, the taken-for-granted 9-to-5 workday and Monday through Friday workweek have had a significant impact on how we divide and define time. Most of us can easily make distinctions between workdays and nonwork days (holidays and weekends), between work hours and rest hours. And it's pretty clear in which of these times sleep is considered appropriate.

Yet the boundary between work (wakefulness) and home (sleep) is not always so clear. In certain occupations that involve the operation of heavy machinery—such as long-distance truckers, train conductors, and airplane pilots—tired workers pose obvious safety hazards.

Hence, they have mandatory downtime policies and work-hour limitations. But as the pace of life has sped up, even office-based, nonmanual occupations are facing the problem of worker exhaustion due to lack of sleep. It's estimated that fatigue costs the U.S. economy $18 billion each year in higher stress and lost productivity (Pasupathy & Barker, 2012). One-third of respondents in one poll indicated that they'd fallen asleep at work in the previous month (National Sleep Foundation, 2008).

Some sociologists have argued that recent changes in the workplace—flexible schedules, telecommuting, home-based work—have begun to blur the time-honored boundaries between public and private, work and home, and given rise to shifting conceptions of sleep. More and more companies have come to the conclusion that restorative naps are a relatively cheap solution to the problem of excessive drowsiness. Many now provide nap rooms (or serenity rooms) for their employees, where they can find comfortable sofas, soothing lighting, and enforced bans on tablet and smartphone usage.

We're not yet to the point where *all* American employees have opportunities to take periodic power naps at work. We're not in danger of becoming a *siesta* culture where midday napping is encouraged anytime soon. However, I hope you can now see that "the very places, spaces [and] schedules . . . of sleep are themselves deeply social, cultural, historical, and political matters—and potentially subject to contestation and change" (Williams, 2011a, p. 31). Even in something so natural as sleep, society interacts with the individual to shape the experience.

Then there's the matter of personal style—your choices in hairstyle, dress, music, videos, and the like. Large-scale marketing strategies are designed to create a demand for particular products or images. Your tastes, and therefore your choices as a consumer, are often influenced by decisions made in far-off corporate boardrooms. Would Chappell Roan, Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift, or Beyoncé have become as popular as they are without a tightly managed and slickly packaged publicity program designed to appeal to adolescents and preadolescents? One California company called Jukin Media is the leader in a relatively new industry that determines whether your social media video will go viral. Once its researchers determine that a video of, say, a baby tasting lemons for the first time or dogs and pigs napping together is good enough, the company contacts the clip's owner and purchases the licensing rights. Then it's just a matter of time before the video is splashed all over social media, becoming what millions of us think is the month's hot new meme (Kelles, 2017).

National and international economic trends also affect your everyday life. You may lose your job or, like André, face a tight job market because of large-scale economic trends. Or, because of the rapid development of certain types of technology, the college degree that may be your ticket to a rewarding career today may not qualify you even for a low-paying, entry-level position 10 years from now. In one poll, 75% of young adults who dropped out of college cited the financial need to work full time as the principal reason why it would be hard for them to go back to school (Lewin, 2009). And if you finish your degree but don't get a good job right out of college, you may have to move back home—like 45% of American adults between 18 and 29 these days (Thier, 2023)—and live there for years after you graduate, not because you can't face the idea of living apart from your beloved parents but because you can't earn enough money to support yourself. Eight out of ten young adults who live with their parents cite the need to save

money as the reason for doing so (Srygley, 2023). Indeed, fewer adults in this age group live with a spouse or partner in their own household than live in their parents' household.

Moving in with one's parents has a variety of consequences aside from just living under the same roof. In one poll, most parents said they were involved in their adult children's lives on a daily basis. Such involvement included making appointments for them, reminding them of deadlines, offering advice on their romantic lives, or giving them financial assistance (as cited in Quealy & Miller, 2019). If you think all this is troubling, consider what it's like in Greece, Italy, South Korea, or Spain, where over 75% of 18- to 29-year-olds live with their parents, regardless of employment or marital status (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024).

Government and politics affect our personal lives too. A political decision made at the local, regional, national, or even international level may result in the closing of a government agency you depend on, make the goods and services to which you have grown accustomed more expensive or less available, reduce the size of your paycheck after taxes are taken out, or make it more difficult for you to vote. Workplace family leave policies or health insurance regulations established by the government may affect your decision whether and when to have a baby or to undergo the elective surgery you've been putting off. If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, the federal and state governments can determine whether you can be fired from your job simply because of your sexual or gender identity. In the United States, decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court can increase or limit your ability to control your fertility, vote, sue an employer for discrimination, use your property however you please, carry a concealed weapon in public, legally marry, become a citizen if you were born elsewhere, or keep the details of your life a private matter.

People's everyday lives can also be touched by events that occur in distant countries:

- In the fall of 2014, an outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in several West African countries grabbed the world's attention. There were more than 20,000 documented cases in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone and about 8,000 deaths. But even though the risk of contracting this disease in the United States was exceedingly low—there were four documented cases and one death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015b)—one-fifth of Americans worried about getting it (Gallup, 2014). Immediately following the outbreak in West Africa, the Department of Homeland Security implemented restrictions on travel to these countries and imposed elevated screening for passengers arriving from them. Anxieties grew. A train station in Dallas was shut down when a passenger was reported to have vomited on the platform. A cruise ship was blocked from docking in Mexico because a passenger worked in the Texas hospital where an Ebola patient had died. Schools were shut down when it was suspected that an employee might have been on the same plane as an Ebola patient. Experts feared that the entire international business travel industry could suffer huge financial losses (Sharkey, 2014).
- When Mount Agung on the island of Bali erupted in 2017, international flights were cancelled or diverted, resulting in significant economic losses for airlines worldwide.

- In 2021, a massive container ship, the *Ever Given*, became lodged sideways in the Suez Canal, the busiest trade route in the world. For days, it brought global markets, most notably crude oil, to a standstill. As a result, oil prices jumped in the United States.
- And, of course, the global coronavirus pandemic began in China but soon reached every corner of the globe, disrupting national economies, killing millions of people, and instantly altering the life rhythm of just about every person on earth.

These are only some of the ways in which events in the larger world can affect individual lives. Can you think of others?

Sociologists do not deny that individuals make choices or that they must take personal responsibility for those choices. But they are quick to point out that we cannot fully understand the things happening in our lives, private and personal though they may be, without examining the influence of the people, events, and societal features that surround us. By showing how social processes can shape us, and how individual action can in turn affect those processes, sociology provides unique insight into the taken-for-granted personal events and the large-scale cultural and global processes that make up our everyday existence.

Other disciplines study human life too. Biologists study how the body works. Neurologists examine what goes on inside the brain. Psychologists study what goes on inside the mind to create human behavior. These disciplines focus almost exclusively on structures and processes that reside *within* the individual. In contrast, sociologists study what goes on *among* people as individuals, groups, or societies. How do social forces affect the way people interact with one another? How do individuals make sense of their private lives and the social worlds they occupy? How does everyday social interaction create "society"?

Personal experiences, such as love, sexuality, poverty, aging, and prejudice, are better understood when examined within the appropriate societal context. For instance, U.S. adults tend to believe that they marry purely for love, when in fact society pressures people to marry from the same social class, religion, and race (Berger, 1963). Sociology, unlike other disciplines, forces us to look outside the tight confines of individual anatomy and personality to understand the phenomena that shape us. Consider, for example, the following situations:

- A 14-year-old girl, bullied by classmates for being slightly overweight, begins systematically starving herself in the hope of becoming more attractive.
- A 58-year-old stockbroker, unable to find work since his firm laid him off years ago, sinks into a depression after running out of money, losing his family, and being evicted from his apartment. Some nights he sleeps on friends' couches; other times he finds a bed in a shelter. A decade ago, he lived an upper-middle class lifestyle; now he is considered unhoused.
- The student body president at a local university cannot begin or end their day without several shots of whiskey.

What do these people have in common? Your first response might be that they all have terrible personal problems that have made their lives suck. If you saw them only for what they've become—the "anorexic," the "homeless person," or the "alcoholic"—you might think

they have some kind of personality defect, genetic flaw, or mental problem that renders them incapable of coping with the demands of contemporary life. Maybe they simply lack the willpower to pick themselves up and move on. In short, your immediate tendency may be to focus on the unique, perhaps "abnormal," characteristics of these people to explain their problems.

But we cannot downplay the importance of their *social* worlds. There is no denying that we live in a society that exalts lean bodies, values individual achievement and economic success, and encourages drinking to excess. Some people suffer under these conditions when they don't measure up. This is not to say that all people exposed to the same social messages inevitably fall victim to the same problems. Some overcome their wretched childhoods, others withstand the tragedy of economic failure and begin anew, and some are immune to narrowly defined cultural images of beauty. But to understand fully the nature of human life or of particular social problems, we must acknowledge the broader social context in which these things occur.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Unfortunately, we typically don't see the connections between the personal events in our everyday lives and the larger society in which we live. People in a country such as the United States, which places a high premium on individual achievement, have difficulty looking beyond their immediate situation. Someone who loses a job, gets divorced, or flunks out of school in such a society has trouble imagining that these experiences are somehow related to massive cultural or historical processes.

The ability to see the impact of these forces on our private lives is what the famous sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) called the **sociological imagination**. The sociological imagination enables us to understand the larger historical picture and its meaning in our own lives. Mills argued that no matter how personal we think our experiences are, many of them can be seen as products of society-wide forces. The task of sociology is to help us view our lives as the intersection between personal biography and societal history and thereby to provide a means for us to interpret our lives and social circumstances.

Getting fired, for example, can be a terrible, even traumatic, private experience. Feelings of personal failure are inevitable when one loses a job. But would your feelings of failure differ if you lived in Ames, Iowa—where the unemployment rate is less than 2%—versus El Centro, California— where the rate is over 17% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024e)? If yes, then we must see unemployment not as a personal malfunction but as a social problem that has its roots in the economic and political structures of society. Listen to how one columnist described his job loss during the Great Recession of 2008:

> Five years ago, when the magazine dismissed me, fewer Americans were unemployed than are now, and I felt like a solitary reject in a nation of comfortable successes. . . . If I were to get the same news now, in an era of mass layoffs and major bankruptcies, I wonder if I would suffer as I did then. . . . Maybe I would just shrug instead and head outside for a relaxing bike ride. (Kirn, 2009, p. 13)

Such an easygoing response to being fired is probably uncommon. Nevertheless, his point is important sociologically: Being unemployed is not simply a character flaw or personal failure if a significant number of people in one's community are also unemployed. We can't explain a spike in

the unemployment rate as a sudden increase in the number of incompetent or unprepared individual workers in the labor force. As long as the economy is arranged so that employees are easily replaced or slumps inevitably occur, the social problem of unemployment cannot be solved at the personal level.

The same can be said for divorce, which people usually experience as an intimate tragedy. But in the United States, it's estimated that 4 out of every 10 marriages that begin this year will eventually end in divorce. And divorce rates are increasing dramatically in many countries around the world. We must therefore view divorce in the context of broader historical changes occurring throughout societies: in family, law, religion, economics, and the culture as a whole. It is impossible to explain significant changes in divorce rates over time by focusing exclusively on the personal characteristics and behaviors of divorcing individuals. Divorce rates don't rise simply because individual spouses have more difficulty getting along with one another than they used to, and they don't fall because more spouses are suddenly being nicer to each other.

Mills did not mean to imply that the sociological imagination should debilitate us—that is, force us to powerlessly perceive our lives as wholly beyond our control. In fact, the opposite is true. An awareness of the impact of social forces or world history on our personal lives is a prerequisite to any efforts we make to change our social circumstances.

Indeed, the sociological imagination allows us to recognize that the solutions to many of our most serious social problems lie not in changing the personal situations and characteristics of individual people but in changing the social institutions and roles available to them (Mills, 1959). Drug addiction, homelessness, sexual violence, hate crimes, eating disorders, suicide attempts, and other unfortunate situations will not go away simply by treating or punishing a person who is suffering from or engaging in the behavior.

Several years ago, a terrible event occurred at the university where I taught at the time. On a pleasant May night at the beginning of final exam week, a first-year student killed himself. The incident sent shock waves through this small, close-knit campus.

As you would expect in the immediate aftermath of such a tragedy, the question on everyone's mind was "Why did he do it?" Although no definitive answer could ever be obtained, most people simply concluded that it was a "typical" suicide. They assumed that he must have been despondent, hopeless, unhappy, overwhelmed and unable to cope with the demands of college life. Some students said they heard he was failing some of his courses. Others said they heard he didn't get into the fraternity he wanted or that he was a bit of a loner. In other words, something was wrong with *him*.

As heartbreaking as this incident was, it was far from unique. Between 1950 and 2018, the U.S. suicide rate more than tripled for people between the ages of 15 and 24, making it the second leading cause of death in this age group (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019; ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2024). And just since 1980, the suicide rate for 5- to 14-year-olds has quadrupled and is now the third leading cause of death among school age children. In 2019, 19% of U.S. high school students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the previous year (Ivey-Stephenson et al., 2020).

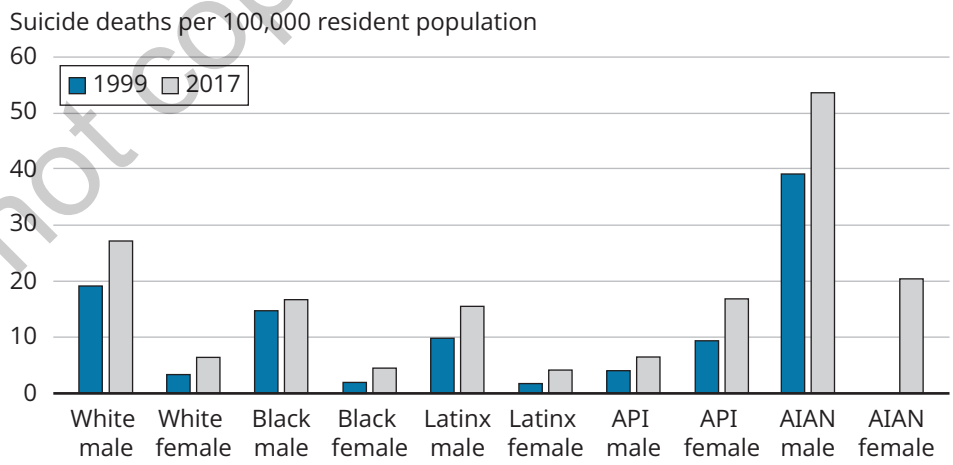
Focusing on individual feelings, such as depression, hopelessness, and frustration, doesn't tell us why so many people in this age group commit suicide, nor does it tell us why rates of youth suicide increase—or for that matter decrease—from decade to decade. So to understand why the student at my university made such a choice, we must look beyond his private mental state and examine the social and historical factors that may have affected him.

Clearly, life in contemporary developed societies is focused on individual accomplishment—being well dressed, popular, and successful—more strongly than ever before. Young people face almost constant pressure to "measure up" and define their identities, and therefore their self-worth, according to standards set by others (Mannon, 1997). Although most adjust fairly well, others can't. In addition, as competition for scarce financial resources becomes more acute, young people are likely to experience heightened levels of stress and confusion about their own futures. To some, expectations regarding educational success have spun out of control, resulting in a national school-related stress epidemic. As one teacher put it, "We are sitting on a ticking time bomb" (as quoted in Abeles, 2016, p. 2). When the quest for success begins earlier and earlier, the costs of not succeeding increase. Media depictions of youthful angst can exacerbate the problem. For instance, one study found that in the month following the 2017 release of the Netflix show *13 Reasons Why* (a show about a young woman who takes her own life), there was a 29% increase in suicide rates among 10- to 17-year-olds (Bridge et al., 2019).

Growing educational expectations may explain why suicides among young men of color (ages 15–24), once quite rare and still relatively less frequent than suicides among white people (about 80% of all suicide victims in the U.S. are white [Statista, 2024c]), increased dramatically in the past two decades (see Figure 1.1). Some experts have blamed these trends on a growing sense of hopelessness and a long-standing cultural taboo against discussing mental health matters. Others, however, have cited broader social factors, brought about, ironically, by the growing economy of the late 20th century and the more recent recovery from the 2008 recession. As more and more families of color move into the middle class, they feel increasing pressure to compete in traditionally white-dominated professions and social environments.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ How Do Race and Gender Affect Young People's Desire to Commit Suicide?

API = Asian and Pacific Islander; AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native.



Source: Curtin & Hedeggard (2019).

You'll also notice in Figure 1.1 that the suicide rates of young women of all races and ethnicities have consistently been lower than those of young men. Can you think of a sociological reason to account for this fact? Is it less stressful being a teenage girl than a teenage boy in this society?

In other societies, different types of social changes account for fluctuations in suicide rates. For instance, South Korea has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world (29 per 100,000; World Population Review, 2024), nearly 80% greater than that of the United States. South Korea has achieved phenomenal growth since World War II, transforming from a poor rural country to one of the world's most thriving economies. But with economic success comes economic pressure. Twenty years ago, South Korea experienced a major financial crash. Since then, fear of another crash has intensified workplace stress. According to the South Korean Health and Welfare Ministry, 90% of South Koreans who commit suicide suffer from stress-related conditions. In addition, South Korea's highly competitive educational system creates heightened anxiety for young people. The suicide rate for South Koreans between the ages of 10 and 19 is the highest in the world. As one author put it, "South Korea's work and school cultures are lethally toxic" (Singh, 2017, p. 1).

Émile Durkheim: Not All Suicides Are Created Equal

Sociologists' interest in linking suicide to certain societal processes is not new. In one of the classic pieces of social research, the famous sociologist Émile Durkheim (1897/1951) argued that suicide is more likely to occur under particular social circumstances and in particular communities. He was the first to see suicide as a manifestation of changes in society rather than of psychological shortcomings.

How does one go about determining whether rates of suicide are influenced by the structure of society? Durkheim decided to test his theory by comparing existing official statistics and historical records across groups, a research strategy sometimes referred to as the **comparative method**. Many sociologists continue to follow this methodology, analyzing statistics compiled by governmental agencies, such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the National Center for Health Statistics, to draw comparisons of suicide rates among groups.

For about 7 years, Durkheim carefully examined the available data on suicide rates among various social groups in Europe—from different regions of countries, certain religious or ethnic groups, and so on—looking for important social patterns. If suicides were purely acts of individual desperation, he reasoned, one would not expect to find any noticeable changes in the rates from year to year or from society to society. That is, the distribution of desperate, unstable, unhappy individuals should be roughly equal across time and culture. If, however, certain groups or societies had a consistently higher rate of suicide than others, something more than individual disposition would seem to be at work.

After compiling his figures, Durkheim concluded that there are actually several different types of suicide. Sometimes, he found, people take their own lives when they see no possible way to improve their oppressive circumstances. They come to the conclusion that suicide is preferable to a harsh life that has no chance of improving. Think of prisoners serving life sentences or slaves who take their own lives to escape their miserable confinement and lack of freedom. Durkheim called this type of suicide **fatalistic suicide**.

Another type, what he called **anomic suicide**, occurs when people's lives are suddenly disrupted by major social events, such as economic depressions, wars, and famines. At these times, he argued,

the conditions around which people have organized their lives are dramatically altered, leaving them with a sense of hopelessness and despair as they come to realize they can no longer live the life to which they were accustomed. For instance, anxiety about job insecurity acts as a chronic stressor that can increase the likelihood of suicide (Ng et al., 2013). A study of suicide trends over the past 80 years found that overall rates tend to rise during economic recessions and fall during economic expansions (Luo et al., 2011). Many experts attribute the 28% increase in suicides among U.S. adults between the ages of 35 and 64 in the early 2010s to the economic recession of 2008 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). The financial crisis that gripped Europe in the mid-2010s led to a spike in suicide rates in the hardest-hit countries, such as Greece, Ireland, and Italy. The problem became so pronounced that European psychiatrists started calling it "suicide by economic crisis" (Reeves et al., 2014). Similarly, pandemics (the Spanish Flu in 1918, SARS in 2003, Ebola in 2013, and, COVID-19 in 2020) all led to spikes in suicides, especially in the hardest hit regions of the world (Liang & Nestadt, 2021; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023).

Conversely, Durkheim argued that people who live in poor countries are, in a sense, "immune" to this type of suicide: "Poverty protects against anomic suicide because it is a restraint in itself" (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 254). Indeed, there is some evidence that people who live in poor countries have a significantly lower risk of depression than those who live in industrialized countries (as cited in Weil, 2011). What Durkheim couldn't have predicted, however, was the role that communication technology plays in instantly exposing people to the lifestyles of others half a world away. In Durkheim's time, poor people in isolated rural areas had little, if any, knowledge of how wealthier people lived. So they had no way of comparing their lot in life to others who were better off. Today the internet is available in some of the remotest regions of the world, providing people with instant information about (and instant comparisons to) the comforts and privileges of the more affluent. So do you think that poverty protects people from committing suicide?

Durkheim also discovered that suicide rates in all the countries he examined tended to be consistently higher among widowed, single, and divorced people than among married people; higher among people without children than among parents; and higher among Protestants than among Catholics. Did this mean that unmarried people, childless people, and Protestants were more unhappy, depressed, or psychologically dysfunctional than other people? Durkheim didn't think so. Instead, he felt that something about the nature of social life among people in these groups increased the likelihood of what he called **egoistic suicide**.

Durkheim reasoned that when group, family, or community ties are weak or deemphasized, people feel disconnected and alone. He pointed out, for instance, that the Catholic Church emphasizes salvation through community and binds its members to the church through elaborate doctrine and ritual; Protestantism, in contrast, emphasizes individual salvation and responsibility. This religious individualism, he believed, explained the differences he noticed in suicide rates between Catholics and Protestants. Self-reliance and independence may glorify one in God's eyes, but they become liabilities if one is in the throes of personal tragedy.

Durkheim feared that life in modern society tends to be individualistic and dangerously alienating. More than a century later, contemporary sociologists have found evidence supporting Durkheim's insight (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Riesman, 1950). Many people in the United States today don't know and have no desire to know their neighbors. Strangers are treated with suspicion. In the pursuit of economic opportunities, we have become more willing to relocate,

sometimes to regions far from family and existing friends and colleagues—the very people who could and would offer support in times of need.

The structure of our communities discourages the formation of bonds with others, and, not surprisingly, the likelihood of suicide increases at the same time. In the United States today, the highest suicide rates can be found in sparsely populated states, such as Wyoming, Alaska, New Mexico, Montana, and South Dakota (National Center for Health Statistics, 2023). Table 1.1 and Figure 1.2 show this pattern. These states tend to have a larger proportion of new residents

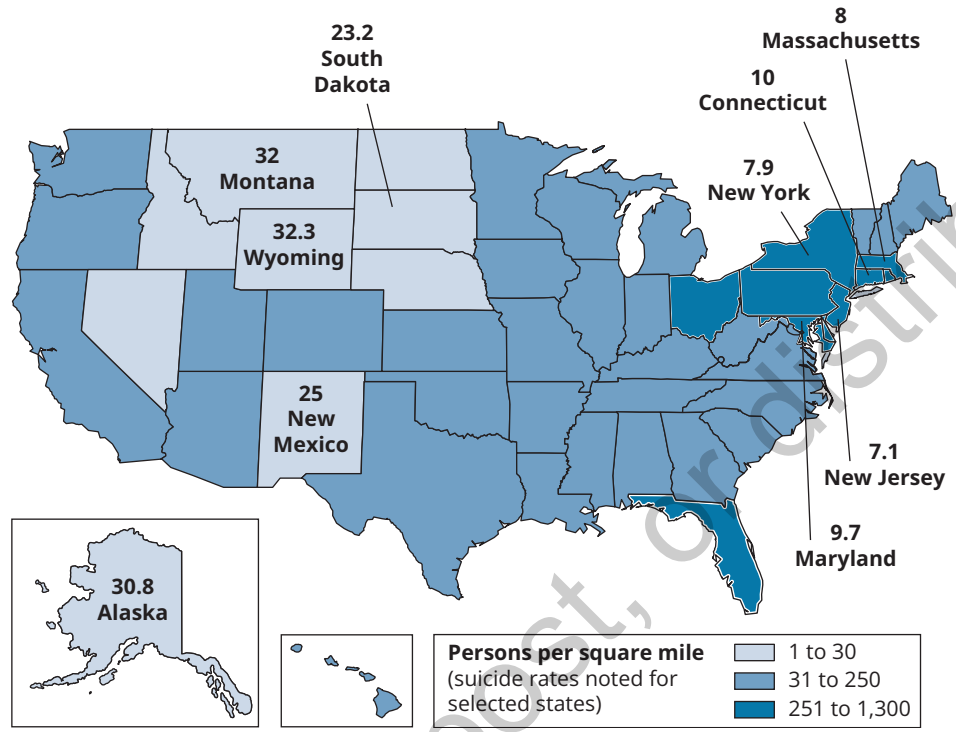
TABLE 1.1 ■ The More Crowded the State, the Lower the Suicide Rate

State	Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population	Persons per Square Mile
United States	**14.2**	**94.8**
Alabama	15.8	100.9
Alaska	30.8	1.3
Arizona	19.5	65.4
Arkansas	20.6	59.0
California	10.1	250.0
Colorado	22.8	56.7
Connecticut	10.0	747.0
Delaware	13.6	529.6
Florida	14.0	421.4
Georgia	15.3	191.1
Hawaii	13.7	223.5
Idaho	20.5	23.8
Illinois	11.1	226.1
Indiana	16.4	191.5
Iowa	17.5	57.4
Kansas	19.4	36.0
Kentucky	17.9	114.6
Louisiana	14.8	105.8
Maine	19.5	45.2
Maryland	9.7	636.4
Massachusetts	8.0	897.5
Michigan	14.3	177.3

State	Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population	Persons per Square Mile
Minnesota	13.9	72.1
Mississippi	16.2	62.6
Missouri	18.7	90.1
Montana	32.0	7.8
Nebraska	15.0	25.8
Nevada	21.5	29.1
New Hampshire	15.1	156.6
New Jersey	7.1	1,263.2
New Mexico	25.0	17.4
New York	7.9	415.3
North Carolina	13.2	222.8
North Dakota	20.8	11.4
Ohio	14.6	288.5
Oklahoma	22.1	59.1
Oregon	19.5	44.1
Pennsylvania	13.9	289.7
Rhode Island	10.3	1,060.0
South Carolina	15.2	178.7
South Dakota	23.2	12.1
Tennessee	17.0	172.8
Texas	14.2	116.8
Utah	20.1	41.5
Vermont	20.3	70.2
Virginia	13.2	220.8
Washington	15.3	117.6
West Virginia	20.6	73.8
Wisconsin	15.1	109.1
Wyoming	32.3	6.0

Sources: National Center for Health Statistics (2023); ProQuest Statistical Abstract (2024, Table 15).

FIGURE 1.2 ■ What States Have the Highest and Lowest Suicide Rates?



Sources: National Center for Health Statistics (2023); ProQuest Statistical Abstract (2024, Table 15).

who are not part of an established community. People tend to be more isolated, less likely to seek help or comfort from others in times of trouble, and therefore more susceptible to suicide than people who live in more populous states. It's worth noting that sparsely populated rural areas also have higher rates of gun ownership than other areas of the United States. More than half of the rural youths who kill themselves do so with a firearm. Indeed, gun suicides in general are three times more common in rural areas than in urban areas (Beck, 2015b).

Durkheim also felt, however, that another type of suicide (what he called **altruistic suicide**) is more likely when the ties to one's community are too strong instead of too weak. He suggested that in certain societies, individuality is completely overshadowed by one's group membership; the individual literally lives for the group, and personality is merely a reflection of the collective identity of the community. In some cases, commitment to a particular political cause can be powerful enough to lead some people to take their own lives. In India, the number of politically motivated suicides doubled between 2006 and 2008. For example, a few years ago 200 people took their own lives in support of efforts to establish a separate state, Telangana, in southern India (Polgreen, 2010). Spiritual loyalty can also lead to altruistic suicide. Some religious sects require their members to reject their ties to outside people and groups and to live by the values

and customs of their new community. When members feel that they can no longer contribute to the group and sustain their value within it, they may take their own lives out of loyalty to cultural expectations.

Just as suicide in these settings is tied to the social system of which people are a part, so, too, was the suicide of the young college student at my university. His choices and life circumstances were also a function of the values and conditions of his society. No doubt he had serious emotional problems, but these problems may have been part and parcel of his social circumstances. Had he lived in a society that didn't place as much pressure on young people or glorify individual achievement, he might not have chosen suicide. That's what the sociological imagination helps us understand.

CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, understanding our place within cultural, historical, and global contexts is more important than ever. The world is shrinking. Communication technology binds us to people on the other side of the planet. Increasing ecological awareness opens our eyes to the far-reaching effects of environmental degradations. The changes associated with colossal events in one country (political upheavals, deadly virus outbreaks, natural disasters, economic crises, school shootings, technological revolutions) often quickly reverberate around the world. The local and global consequences of such events often continue to be felt for years.

When we look at how people's lives are altered by such phenomena—as they sink into poverty or ascend to prosperity, stand in bread lines or enter a career previously unavailable, or find their sense of ethnic identity, personal safety, or self-worth altered—we can begin to understand the everyday importance of large-scale social change.

However, we must remember that individuals are not just helpless pawns of societal forces. They simultaneously influence and are influenced by society. We live in a world in which our everyday lives are largely a product of structural, or **macrolevel**, societal and historical processes. Society is an objective fact that coerces, even creates us (Berger, 1963). At the same time, we constantly create, maintain, reaffirm, and transform society. Hence, society is part and parcel of individual-level human interaction, what sociologists call **microlevel** everyday phenomena (Collins, 1981). But although we create society, we then collectively forget we've done so, believe it exists independently of us, and live our lives under its influence. The Micro-Macro Connections found throughout this book will help you see this interrelationship between macrolevel societal forces and many of the microlevel experiences we have as individuals.

The next chapter provides a more detailed treatment of this theme. Then, in Part II, I examine how society and our social lives are constructed and ordered. I focus on the interplay between individuals and the people, groups, organizations, institutions, and culture that collectively make up our society. Part III focuses on the structure of society, with particular attention to the various forms of social inequality.

YOUR TURN

The sociological imagination serves as the driving theme throughout this book. It's not a particularly difficult concept to grasp in the abstract: Things that are largely outside our control affect our everyday lives in ways that are sometimes not immediately apparent; our personal biographies are a function, at least in part, of broader historical circumstances. Yet what does this actually mean? Is it possible to see the impact of larger social and historical events on your own life? One way is to find out what occurrences were happening at the time of your birth. Go to the library—or an online archive—and find a newspaper and a popular magazine that were published on the day you were born. It would be especially useful to find a newspaper from the town or city in which you were born. What major news events took place that day? What were the dominant social and political concerns at the time? What was the state of the economy? What was considered fashionable in clothing, music, movies, and so forth? Ask your parents or other adults about their reactions to these events and conditions.

How do you think those reactions affected the values of your family and the way you were raised? What have been the lasting effects, if any, of these historical circumstances on the person you are today? In addition, you might want to check similar media sources to determine the political, economic, global, and cultural trends that were prominent 15 or so years later when you entered high school. The emergence from adolescence into young adulthood is a significant developmental stage in the lives of most people. It often marks the first time that others— including parents and other adults—take us seriously. And it is arguably the most self-conscious time of our lives. Try to determine how these dominant social phenomena will continue to influence your life after college. Imagine how different your life might have been had these social conditions been different—for instance, a different political atmosphere, a stronger or weaker economy, a more tolerant or more restrictive way of life, and so on.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- The primary theme of sociology is that our everyday thoughts and actions are the product of a complex interplay between massive social forces and personal characteristics. We can't understand the relationship between individuals and societies without understanding both.
- The sociological imagination is the ability to see the impact of social forces on our private lives—an awareness that our lives lie at the intersection of personal biography and societal history.
- Rather than studying what goes on within people, sociologists study what goes on between people, whether as individuals, groups, organizations, or entire societies. Sociology forces us to look outside the tight confines of our individual personalities to understand the phenomena that shape us.

KEY TERMS

altruistic suicide
anomic suicide
comparative method
egoistic suicide
fatalistic suicide
individualistic explanation
macrolevel
microlevel
sociological imagination
sociology

2 SEEING AND THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

2.1 Describe how individuals form and influence societies.

2.2 Explain the social influence that other people have on our everyday lives.

2.3 List social structures and institutions that influence us.

2.4 Summarize three key perspectives on social order.

Thirty years ago, deadly ethnic violence erupted in the small African nation of Rwanda. The Hutu majority had begun a systematic program to exterminate the Tutsi minority. Soon, gruesome pictures of the tortured and dismembered bodies of Tutsi men, women, and children began to appear on television screens around the world. When it was over, more than 800,000 Tutsis had been slaughtered—half of whom died in a 3-month stretch between April and July 1994. Surely, we thought, such horror must have been perpetrated by bands of vicious, crazed thugs who derived some sort of twisted pleasure from committing acts of unspeakable cruelty. Or maybe these were the extreme acts of angry soldiers, trained killers who were committed to destroying as completely as possible an enemy they considered subhuman.

To be sure, the Hutu militia, known as the *Interahamwe*, conducted mass "weeding" raids where they killed and maimed thousands. But much of the responsibility for these atrocities lay elsewhere, in a most unlikely place: among the ordinary, previously law-abiding Rwandan citizens who eventually became desensitized to the slaughter (Scull et al., 2016). Many of the participants in the genocide were the least likely brutes you could imagine. For instance, here's how one woman described her husband, a man responsible for scores of Tutsi deaths:

> He came home often. He never carried a weapon, not even his machete. I knew he was a leader. I knew the Hutus were out there cutting Tutsis. With me, he behaved nicely. He made sure we had everything we needed. . . . He was gentle with the children. . . . To me, he was the nice man I married. (as quoted in Rwandan Stories, 2011, p. 1)

Indeed, the tendency for a single individual to engage in an act of horrific brutality one minute and an act of kindness the next was commonplace. A Hutu man whose life was spared by a local Tutsi militia leader described people like his rescuer this way:

> Every person who killed people, you will also find that they saved one or two other people. . . . You'll find thousands if not hundreds of thousands of people in Rwanda who, on one hand were heavily involved in the killings, but also saved some individuals. (as quoted in Shealy, 2019, p. 1)

Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, a former social worker and the country's minister of family and women's affairs, promised the Tutsis in one village that they would be safe in a local stadium. When they arrived there, armed militia were waiting to kill them. She instructed one group of soldiers to burn alive a group of 70 women and girls, adding, "Before you kill the women, you need to rape them" (as quoted in Zimbardo, 2007, p. 13). In 2011, a United Nations tribunal found that she had used her political position to help abduct and kill uncounted Tutsi men, women, and children and sentenced her to life in prison (Simons, 2011).

Some of the most gruesome attacks occurred in churches and missions (Lacey, 2006). Two Benedictine nuns and a National University of Rwanda physics professor stood trial for their role in the killings. The nuns were accused of informing the military that Tutsi refugees had sought sanctuary in the church and of standing by as the soldiers massacred them. One nun allegedly provided the death squads with cans of gasoline, which were used to set fire to a building where 500 Tutsis were hiding. The professor was accused of drawing up a list for the killers of Tutsi employees and students at the university and then killing at least seven Tutsis himself (Simons, 2001). A Catholic priest was sentenced to 15 years in prison for ordering his church to be demolished by bulldozers while 2,000 ethnic Tutsis sought refuge there. Indeed, some have argued that Rwandan churches themselves were complicit in the genocide from the beginning (Longman, 2009; Rittner, 2004).

A report by the civil rights organization African Rights provided evidence that members of the medical profession were deeply involved too (Harris, 1996). The report detailed how doctors joined with militiamen to hunt down Tutsis, turning hospitals into slaughterhouses. Some helped soldiers drag sick and wounded refugees out of their beds to be killed. Others took advantage of their position of authority to organize roadblocks, distribute ammunition, and compile lists of Tutsi colleagues, patients, and neighbors to be sought out and slaughtered. Many doctors who didn't participate in the actual killing refused to treat wounded Tutsis and withheld food and water from refugees who sought sanctuary in hospitals. In fact, the president of Rwanda and the minister of health were both physicians who were eventually tried as war criminals.

Average, well-balanced people—teachers, social workers, priests and nuns devoted to the ideals of charity and mercy; and physicians trained to heal and save lives—had changed, almost overnight, into cold-hearted killers. How could something like this have happened? The answer to this question lies in the sociological claim that individual behavior is largely shaped by social forces and situational contingencies. The circumstances of large-scale ethnic hatred and war have the power to transform well-educated, "nice" people with no previous history of violence into cruel butchers. Tragically, such forces were at work in many of the 20th and 21st centuries'

most infamous examples of human brutality, such as the Nazi Holocaust during World War II and, more recently, large-scale ethnic massacres in Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, Burma, Kosovo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Darfur region of Sudan, Myanmar, and Syria, as well as Rwanda.

But social circumstances don't just create opportunities for brutality; they can also motivate ordinary people to engage in astounding and unexpected acts of heroism. The 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda* depicts the true story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, who risked his own life to shelter more than twelve hundred Tutsi refugees from certain death. Rusesabagina was a middle-class Hutu married to a Tutsi and the father of four children. He was a businessman with an eye toward turning a profit and a taste for the finer things in life. But when the genocide began, he used his guile, international contacts, and even water from the swimming pool to keep the refugees alive.

In this chapter, I examine the process by which individuals construct society and the way people's lives are linked to the social environment in which they live. The relationship between the individual and society is a powerful one—each continually affects the other.

HOW INDIVIDUALS STRUCTURE SOCIETY

In the first chapter, I used the word *society* rather loosely. Formally, sociologists define **society** as a population living in the same geographic area who share a culture and a common identity and whose members are subject to the same political authority. Societies may consist of people with the same ethnic heritage or of hundreds of different groups who speak a multitude of languages. Some societies are highly industrialized and complex; others are primarily agricultural and relatively simple in structure. Some are very religious; others are distinctly secular.

According to the 19th-century French philosopher Auguste Comte, all societies, whatever their form, contain both forces for stability, which he called "social statics," and forces for change, which he called "social dynamics." Sometimes, however, people use the term *society* only to mean a static entity—a natural, permanent, and historical structure. They frequently talk about society "planning" or "shaping" our lives and describe it as a relatively unchanging set of organizations, institutions, systems, and cultural patterns into which successive generations of people are born and socialized.

As a result, sociology students often start out believing not only that society is powerfully influential (which, of course, it is) but also that it is something that exists "out there," completely separate and distinct from us (which it isn't). It is tempting to view society simply as a top-down initiator of human activity, a massive entity that methodically shapes the lives of all individuals within it like some gigantic puppeteer manipulating a bunch of marionettes. This characterization is weird but not entirely inaccurate. Society does exert influence on its members through certain identifiable structural features and historical circumstances. The concept of the sociological imagination discussed in Chapter 1 implies that structural forces beyond our direct control do shape our personal lives.

But this view is only one side of the sociological coin. The sociological imagination also encourages us to see that each individual has a role in forming a society and influencing the

course of its history. As we navigate our social environments, we respond in ways that may modify the effects and even the nature of that environment (House, 1981). As one sociologist wrote more than 60 years ago,

> No [society], however massive it may appear in the present, existed in this massivity from the dawn of time. Somewhere along the line each one of its salient features was concocted by human beings. . . . Since all social systems were created by [people], it follows that [people] can also change them. (Berger, 1963, p. 128)

To fully understand society, then, we must see it as a human creation made up of people interacting with one another. Communication plays an important role in the construction of society. If we couldn't communicate with one another to reach an understanding about society's expectations, we couldn't live together. Through day-to-day conversation, we construct, reaffirm, experience, and alter the reality of our society. By responding to other people's messages, comments, and gestures in the expected manner, and by talking about social abstractions as real things, we help shape society (Shibutani, 1961).

Imagine two people sitting on a park bench discussing the spate of deadly school shootings in this country. According to the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (2022), there were over 2,000 school shooting incidents—resulting in more than 680 deaths and 1,900 injuries—between 1970 and 2022. Although these numbers may be terrifying to parents of school-age children, such events are exceptionally rare. Consider, for instance, that more than 56 million children from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade attend school each day (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). In addition, less than 2% of all homicides involving children between ages 5 and 18 occur at school, and only a very small subset of these are active shooter incidents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021f). The director of the National Center for Juvenile Justice stated a few years ago that, "especially in the younger grades, schools are the safest places they can be" (as quoted in Goldstein, 2018, p. A13). Nevertheless, public fear has led many school districts to be proactive in taking precautions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Musu-Gillette, 2018) 95% of American schools now conduct "active shooter" readiness and lockdown drills. There's even a new category of emergency situations for first responders called "intentional mass casualty events" (Williams, 2019).

Person A believes that all teachers—from elementary school to high school—should be trained to fire a weapon and be armed in the classroom. They argue that the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun who is determined to kill as many people as possible is to make sure that there are armed good guys right there to stop the perpetrator. They point out that a teacher with a gun can respond more quickly and effectively than a uniformed security guard down the hall. Person B believes that the best way to stop these massacres from happening is to enact stricter local and nationwide gun control laws so that it becomes harder for potential assailants to get their hands on lethal weapons. They point out that the United States has more guns—and more gun deaths—than any other country (Kristof & Marsh, 2017).

These two people obviously don't agree on the best way to prevent these tragedies from occurring. But merely by discussing the problem, they are acknowledging that it is real and

urgent. In talking about such matters—as well as a multitude of less consequential ones—people give shape and substance to society's ideals and values (Hewitt, 1988).

Even something as apparently unchangeable as our society's past can be shaped and modified by individuals. We usually think of history as a fixed, unalterable collection of social events that occurred long ago; only in science fiction novels or those old *Back to the Future* movies can one go back and change the past. No one would question that the Declaration of Independence was signed on August 2, 1776; that John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963; that hijackers flew passenger jets into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001; that the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage on June 26, 2015; that a gunman killed 58 people and wounded 422 (the largest mass shooting, to date, in U.S. history) at an outdoor concert in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017; or that pro-Trump rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 in an attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election. Although such historical events themselves don't change, their meaning and relevance can. Consider the celebration in 1992 of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to the Americas. For generations, American schoolchildren have been taught that Columbus's 1492 "discovery" represented a triumphant step forward for Western civilization. We even have a holiday in his honor. However, increasing sensitivity to the past persecution of Indigenous people has forced many people to reconsider the historical meaning of Columbus's journey. In fact, some historians now consider this journey and what followed it to be one of history's most dismal examples of reckless and deadly prejudice. Several states have even changed the name of Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day. So, you see, history might best be regarded as a work in progress.

When we view society this way, we can begin to understand the role each of us has in maintaining or altering it. Sometimes the actions of ordinary individuals mobilize larger groups of people to collectively alter some aspect of society.

Perhaps you've heard of a young Pakistani woman named Malala Yousafzai. In 2009, when she was 11, Malala began writing a blog for the BBC detailing her life under the Taliban, who at the time were seeking to control the Swat Valley region of Pakistan, where she lived. She wrote about the importance of education for young girls, something the Taliban was trying to ban. As her blog gained a greater international following, she became more prominent, giving interviews in newspapers and on television. But her increased visibility also meant that she was becoming a greater threat to the Taliban. So, in October 2012, a gunman boarded Malala's school bus, walked directly up to her, and shot her in the face. She remained unconscious for days and was flown to a hospital in England. Not only did she survive the shooting, but she redoubled her efforts to advocate on behalf of girls' education all around the world. The assassination attempt received worldwide coverage and provoked an outpouring of international sympathy. The United Nations drafted a petition in her name calling on Pakistan—and other countries—to end educational discrimination against girls. Since then, she has spoken before the United Nations, met with world leaders, and, in 2014—at the ripe old age of 17—was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Although she has not been able to return to her home country since she was shot, her work and perseverance have spawned a global movement to ensure educational access for all girls. To date, the Malala Fund has raised $47 million for local education projects in Afghanistan, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey to secure girls'

rights to a minimum of 12 years of free quality education (Malala Fund, 2024). In 2015, world leaders, meeting at the United Nations, followed Malala's lead and committed to delivering free, quality primary and secondary education for every child by 2030.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE: THE IMPACT OF OTHER PEOPLE ON OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

We live in a world with other people. Not the most stunningly insightful sentence you've ever read, I'm guessing. But it is key to understanding the sociology of human behavior. Our everyday lives are a collection of brief encounters, extended conversations, Zoom or FaceTime chats, text or IM exchanges, intimate interactions, and chance collisions with other people. In our early years, we may have our parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and grandparents to contend with. Soon, we begin to form friendships with those outside our families. Over time, whether in-person or through wireless devices, our lives also become filled with connections to others—classmates, teachers, coworkers, bosses, spiritual leaders, therapists—who are neither family nor friends but who have an enormous impact on us. And, of course, we have frequent experiences with total strangers: the barista at the local coffee shop who serves us our daily latte, the DoorDash driver who delivers meals from our favorite restaurant when we'd rather stay home than go out, and the tech support specialist who helps us when our documents won't print or our tablets freeze.

If you think about it, understanding what it means to be alone requires that we know what it's like to be with other people. As I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 6, much of our private identity—what we think of ourselves, the type of people we become, and the images of ourselves we project in public—comes from our contact with others.

Sociologists tell us that these encounters have a great deal of *social influence* over our lives. Whether we're aware of their doing so or not, other people affect our thoughts, likes, and dislikes. Consider why certain songs, books, or films become blockbuster hits. We usually think their popularity is a consequence of many people making their own independent decisions about what appeals to them. But research shows that popularity is a consequence of social influence (Salganik et al., 2006). If one object happens to be slightly more popular than others—such as a particular song that gets streamed a lot on Spotify—it tends to become more popular as more people are drawn to it. As one sociologist put it, "People tend to like what other people like" (Watts, 2007, p. 22). Similarly, the making of art is not just a function of the vision that exists in the minds of solitary artists, it is an enterprise in which many people—suppliers, dealers, critics, consumers, and creators—play a role in producing a piece that the community decides is "art." In this sense, even individual creativity cannot be understood outside its social and cultural context (Becker, 2008).

In a more direct sense, we often take other people's desires and concerns into account before we act. Perhaps you've decided to date someone, only to reconsider when you think, "Would my mother like this person?" Those who influence us may be in our immediate presence or hover in our memories. They may be real or imagined, loved or despised. And their effects on us may be deliberate or accidental.

Imagine for a moment what your life would be like if you had *never* had contact with other people (assuming you could have survived this long!). You wouldn't know what love is or hate or jealousy or compassion or gratitude. You wouldn't know if you were attractive or unattractive, bright or dumb, witty or boring. You'd lack some basic information too. You wouldn't know what day it was, how much a pound weighs, where Switzerland is, or how to read. Furthermore, you'd have no language, and because we use language to think, imagine, predict, plan, wonder, fantasize, and reminisce, you'd lack these abilities as well. In short, you'd lack the key experiences that make you a functioning human being.

Contact with people is essential to a person's social development, as became all the more urgent during the lockdown/quarantine days of the COVID-19 era. But there is much more to social life than simply bumping into others from time to time. We act and react to things and people in our environment because of the meaning we attach to them. At the sight of Zambezi, my big goofy Golden Retriever, playfully barreling toward it, a squirrel instinctively runs away. A human, however, does not have such an automatic reaction. We've all learned from past experiences that some animals are approachable, and others aren't. So, we can think, "Do I know this dog? Is it friendly or mean? Does it want to lick my face or tear me limb from limb?" and respond accordingly. In short, we usually interpret events in our environment before we react.

The presence of other people may motivate you to improve your performance—for example, when the high quality of your pickleball opponent makes you play the best match of your life. But their presence may at other times inhibit you—as when you lose your train of thought during an oral presentation because your ex-lover has just walked into the room. Other people's presence is also essential for the expression of certain feelings or bodily functions. We've all experienced the unstoppable urge to yawn after watching someone else yawn. But have you ever noticed the contagion of coughing that often breaks out in class during a lecture or exam? Research has shown that coughing tends to trigger coughing in those who hear it (as cited in Provine, 2012). And think about the fact that you can't tickle yourself. Being tickled is the product of a *social* interaction. Indeed, according to one study of laughter, people are about 30 times more likely to laugh when they're around other people than when they're alone (Provine, 2000).

Our personal contentment and generosity can be linked to others too. One study found that just knowing someone who is happy—whether a relative, friend, or acquaintance—significantly increases your own chances of happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Another found that shoppers are significantly happier when shopping with other people than when shopping alone, no matter what they buy (Goldsmith, 2016). Such influence can be found on social media. X users prefer to follow other X users who exhibit comparable moods. That is, happy users tend to retweet or reply to other happy users (Bollen et al., 2012). Research also suggests that the presence of female family members (wives, sisters, daughters, mothers) can make men more generous, compassionate, and empathetic. The founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, once cited the inspiration provided by his (now ex-) wife and mother in setting up his charitable foundation, which has given away tens of billions of dollars.

The influence of others goes beyond emotions, behaviors, and performances. Even our physical well-being is affected by those around us. According to researchers in Japan, the risk of heart attack is three times higher among women who live with their husbands and their

husbands' parents than among women who just live with their husbands (as cited in Rabin, 2008). Similarly, a study of 2,000 American married couples found that people with happy spouses have fewer physical impairments, engage in more exercise, and rate their overall health as better than people with unhappy spouses (Chopik & O'Brien, 2016). In fact, three decades of research has shown that having a large network of friends can even increase life expectancy (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Consider also the way people eat. Most of us assume that we eat when we're hungry and stop when we're full. But our eating tendencies reflect the influences of those around us. For instance, when we eat with other people, we adjust our pace to their pace. We also tend to eat longer—and therefore more—when in groups than when we're by ourselves. One researcher found that, on average, people eat 35% more food when they're with one other person than when they're alone. That figure goes up to 75% more when eating with three other people (DeCastro, 1994, 2000). This may explain why a person's chances of becoming obese increase significantly when they have a close friend who is obese (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). As one researcher put it, "Weight can be inherited, but it can also be contagious" (Wansink, 2006, p. 99).

And, of course, other people can sometimes *purposely* sway our actions. I'm sure you've been in situations in which people have tried to persuade you to do things against your will or better judgment. Perhaps someone convinced you to steal a candy bar, skip your sociology class, or disregard the speed limit. On occasion, such social influence can be quite harmful.

Stanley Milgram: Ordinary People and Cruel Acts

In a classic piece of social research, social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1974) set out to determine how far people would go in obeying the commands of an authority. He designed an experimental situation in which a subject, on orders from an authoritative figure, flips a switch, apparently sending a 450-volt shock to an innocent victim.

The subjects responded to an advertisement seeking participants in a study on memory and learning. On a specified day, each subject arrived at the laboratory and was introduced to a stern-looking experimenter (Milgram) wearing a white lab coat. The subject was also introduced to another person who, unknown to the subject, was actually an accomplice of the experimenter.

Each subject was told they would play the role of "teacher" in an experiment examining the effects of punishment on learning; the other person would play the role of the "learner." The teacher was taken to a separate room that held an ominous-looking machine the researcher called a "shock generator." The learner was seated in another room out of the sight of the teacher and was supposedly strapped to an electrode from the shock generator.

The teacher read a series of word pairs (e.g., blue–sky, nice–day, wild–duck) to the learner. After reading the entire list, the teacher read the first word of a pair (e.g., blue) and four alternatives for the second word (e.g., sky, ink, box, lamp). The learner had to select the correct alternative. Following directions from the experimenter, who was present in the room, the teacher flipped a switch and shocked the learner whenever they gave an incorrect answer. The shocks began at the lowest level, 15 volts, and increased with each subsequent incorrect answer all the way up to the 450-volt maximum.

As instructed, all the subjects shocked the learner for each incorrect response. (Remember, the learner was an accomplice of the experimenter and was not actually being shocked.) As the experiment proceeded and the shocks became stronger, the teacher could hear cries from the learner. Most of the teachers, believing they were inflicting serious injury, became visibly upset and wanted to stop. The experimenter, however, ordered them to continue—and many did. Despite the tortured reactions of the victim, 65% of the subjects complied with the experimenter's demands and proceeded to the maximum, 450 volts.

Milgram repeated the study with a variety of subjects and even conducted it in different countries, including Germany and Australia. In each case, about two-thirds of the subjects were willing, under orders from the experimenter, to shock to the limit. Milgram didn't just show that people defer to authority from time to time. He showed just how powerful that tendency is (Blass, 2004). As we saw with the Rwandan genocide, given the right circumstances, ordinarily nice people can be compelled to do terrible things they wouldn't have done otherwise.

Milgram's research raises questions not only about why people would obey an unreasonable authority but also about what the rest of us think of those who do. A study of destructive obedience in the workplace—investigating actions such as dumping toxic waste in a river and manufacturing a defective automobile—found that the public is more likely to forgive those who are responsible when they are believed to be conforming to company policy or obeying the orders of a supervisor than when they are thought to be acting on their own (Hamilton & Sanders, 1995).

Milgram's study has generated a tremendous amount of controversy. For nearly half a century, this pivotal piece of research has been replicated, discussed, and debated by social scientists (Burger, 2009). It has made its way into popular culture, turning up in novels, plays, films, and songs (Blass, 2004). Although some researchers have found that in small groups people sometimes collectively rebel against what they perceive to be an unjust authority (Gamson et al., 1982), most others have replicated Milgram's original findings. In fact, one French study yielded even higher rates of obedience than Milgram found (81% compared to Milgram's 65%; Beauvois et al., 2012).

After all these years, Milgram's findings remain discomforting. It would be much easier to conclude that the acts of inhumanity we read about in our daily newspapers (such as soldiers raping and killing civilians or law enforcement officers using excessive force against unarmed citizens) are the products of defective or inherently evil individuals—a few "bad apples." All society would have to do, then, is identify, capture, and separate these psychopaths from the rest of us. But if Milgram is right—if most of us could commit ghastly acts of brutality given a certain combination of situational circumstances—then the only thing that distinguishes us from evildoers is our good fortune and our social environment.

SOCIETAL INFLUENCE: THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE ON OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

If you stopped reading this chapter here, you'd be inclined to think that societies are made up of a bunch of people exerting all kinds of sway over one another. But social life is much more than that. Society is not just a sum of its human parts; it's also the way those parts are put together,

related to each other, and organized (Coulson & Riddell, 1980). Statuses, roles, groups, organizations, and institutions are the structural building blocks of society. Culture is the mortar that holds these blocks together. Although society is dynamic and constantly evolving, it has an underlying macrolevel structure that persists.

Statuses and Roles

One key element of any society is **status**—the named position that an individual within the society occupies. When most of us hear the word *status*, we tend to associate it with rank or prestige. But here we're talking about a status as any socially defined position a person can inhabit: cook, daughter, anthropologist, spouse, Wordle player, electrician, Instagram-follower, gamer, and so on. Some statuses may, in fact, be quite prestigious, such as prime minister or president. But others carry very little stature, such as gas station attendant or vegan. Some statuses require a tremendous amount of training, such as neurosurgeon or astrophysicist; others, such as ice cream aficionado or hot dog lover, require little effort or none at all.

We all occupy many statuses at the same time. I am a college professor, but I am also a son, uncle, father, grandfather, brother, husband, friend, sushi lover, dog owner, occasional insomniac, once-strong but now mediocre athlete with a bad back and an artificial hip, homeowner, crossword puzzle enthusiast, and author. My behavior at any given moment is dictated to a large degree by the status that's most relevant at that particular time. When I am doing a long, open water swim, my status as professor isn't particularly relevant. But if I decide to lift weights instead of showing up to proctor the final exam in my sociology course, I will be in big trouble!

Sociologists often distinguish between ascribed and achieved statuses. An **ascribed status** is a social position we typically acquire at birth or enter involuntarily later in life. Our race, sex, ethnicity, and identity as someone's child or grandchild are all ascribed statuses. As we get older, we enter the ascribed status of teenager and, eventually, old person. These aren't positions we choose to occupy. An **achieved status**, in contrast, is a social position we take on voluntarily or acquire through our own efforts or accomplishments, such as being a student or a spouse or an engineer.

Of course, the distinction between ascribed and achieved status is not always so clear. Some people become college students not because of their own efforts but because of parental pressure. Chances are the religion with which you identify is the one you inherited from your parents. However, many people decide to change their religious membership later in life. Moreover, as we'll see later in this book, certain ascribed statuses (sex, race, ethnicity, and age) directly influence our access to lucrative achieved statuses.

Whether ascribed or achieved, statuses are important sociologically. For one thing, we don't occupy statuses one at a time. Instead, we always inhabit several simultaneously. It's this intersection of statuses that often has a powerful effect on our lives. For instance, the feminist movement of the late 20th century was roundly criticized for assuming that all women experienced gender inequality similarly. In doing so, it ignored the different ways race and class combined to affect women's disadvantage in society. Or think about how a Black man's interactions with police might differ from those of a white man or, for that matter, a Black woman.

In addition, statuses all come with a set of rights, obligations, behaviors, and duties that people occupying a certain position are expected or encouraged to perform. Each expectation is referred to as a **role**. For instance, the role associated with the status "professor" includes teaching students effectively, answering their questions, grading them impartially, and dressing appropriately. Any out-of-role behavior may be met with shock or suspicion. If I consistently showed up for class in a thong, tank top, and flip-flops that would certainly violate my "scholarly" image and call into question my ability to teach (not to mention my sanity).

Each person, as a result of their skills, interests, and life experiences, defines roles differently. Students enter a class with the general expectation that their professor is knowledgeable about the subject and that they are going to teach them something. Each professor, however, may have a different method of meeting that expectation. Some are very animated; others remain stationary behind a podium. Some do not allow questions until after the lecture; others constantly encourage probing questions from students. Some are meticulous and organized; others are disheveled and absent-minded.

People engage in typical patterns of interaction based on the relationship between their roles and the roles of others. Employers are expected to interact with employees in a certain way, as are doctors with patients and salespeople with customers. In each case, actions are constrained by the role responsibilities and obligations associated with those particular statuses. We know, for instance, that spouses are supposed to interact with each other differently from the way acquaintances or friends are supposed to interact. In a parent–child relationship, both members are linked by certain rights, privileges, and obligations. Parents are responsible for providing their children with the basic necessities of life—food, clothing, shelter, and so forth. These expectations are so powerful that not meeting them may make the parents vulnerable to charges of negligence or abuse. Children, in turn, are expected to abide by their parents' wishes. Thus, interactions within a relationship are functions not only of the individual personalities of the people involved but also of the role requirements associated with the statuses they occupy.

We feel the power of role expectations most clearly when we have difficulty meeting them or when we experience the intersection of two or more conflicting statuses. Sociologists use the term **role strain** to refer to situations in which people lack the necessary resources to fulfill the demands of a particular role, such as when parents can't afford to provide their children with adequate food, clothing, or shelter. Sometimes this strain can be deadly. For instance, physicians are more than twice as likely to commit suicide as nonphysicians, and almost 10% of fourth-year medical students and first-year residents have had suicidal thoughts (as cited in Sinha, 2014). Why? Young doctors feel significant pressure to project intellectual and emotional confidence in the face of life-or-death situations. As one first-year resident put it, "We masquerade as strong and untroubled professionals even in our darkest and most self-doubting moments" (Sinha, 2014, p. A23). A doctor in the last year of medical school is usually expected to care for four patients at a time. But within a few months of graduation, that doctor will be required to oversee the treatment of perhaps 10 patients on any given day. This drastic increase in responsibility can lead to overwhelming role strain.

Role conflict describes situations in which people encounter tension in trying to cope with the demands of incompatible roles. People may feel frustrated in their efforts to do what they

feel they're supposed to do when the role expectations of one status clash with the role expectations of another. For instance, a parent (who also happens to be a prominent sociologist) may have an important out-of-town conference to attend (status of sociologist) on the same day their 10-year-old daughter is appearing as a talking pig in the school play (status of parent). Or a teenager who works hard at their job at the local ice cream shop (status of employee) may be frustrated when their buddies arrive and expect them to sit and chat or to give them free ice cream (status of friend).

Role conflict can sometimes raise serious ethical or legal concerns. For instance, in states that use lethal injection as a means of execution, it is necessary to have a licensed anesthesiologist present to ensure that the prisoner is unconscious when paralyzing and heart-stopping drugs are administered. Ordinarily, the role expectations of doctors emphasize ensuring the health and well-being of the people they treat. But when doctors are part of an execution team, they are expected to use their medical skills and judgment to make killing more humane and less painful. The American Medical Association condemns physicians' involvement in executions as unethical and unprofessional, stating that selecting injection sites, starting intravenous lines, and supervising the administration of lethal drugs violates a doctor's oath to heal or at least "do no harm." In fact, doctors who violate these guidelines face censure and perhaps even the loss of their license (Jauhar, 2017).

Groups

Societies are not simply composed of people occupying statuses and living in accordance with roles. Sometimes individuals form well-defined units called groups. A **group** is a set of people who interact regularly with one another and who are conscious of their identity as a group. Your family, your colleagues at work, and any clubs or sports teams to which you belong are all social groups.

Groups are not just collections of people who randomly come together for some purpose. Their structure defines the relationships among members. When groups are long term, each individual in the group is likely to occupy some named position or status—parent, treasurer, supervisor, linebacker, and so forth.

Group membership can also be a powerful force behind one's future actions and thoughts. Sociologists distinguish between **in-groups**—the groups to which we belong and toward which we feel a sense of loyalty—and **out-groups**—the groups to which we don't belong and toward which we feel a certain amount of antagonism. For instance, a girl who is not a member of the popular clique at school, but wants to be, might structure many of her daily activities around gaining entry into that group.

In addition, like statuses and roles, groups come with a set of general expectations. A person's actions within a group are judged according to a conventional set of ideas about how things ought to be. For example, a coworker who always arrives late for meetings or never takes their turn working an undesirable shift is violating the group's expectations and will be pressured to conform.

The smallest group, of course, is one that consists of two people, or a **dyad**. According to the renowned German sociologist Georg Simmel (1902/1950), dyads (marriages, close friendships, etc.) are among the most meaningful and intense connections we have. The problem, though, is

that dyads are by nature unstable. If one person decides to leave, the group completely collapses. Hence, it's not surprising that for society's most important dyads (i.e., marriages), a variety of legal, religious, and cultural restrictions are in place that make it difficult for people to dissolve them.

The addition of one person to a dyad—forming what Simmel called a **triad**—fundamentally changes the nature of the group. Although triads might appear more stable than dyads because the withdrawal of one person does not necessarily destroy the group, they develop other problems. If you're one of three children in your family, you already know that triads always contain the potential for a **coalition**—where two individuals pair up and perhaps conspire against the third.

Groups can also be classified by their influence on our everyday lives. A **primary group** consists of a small number of members who have direct contact with each other over a relatively long period of time. Emotional attachment is high in such groups, and members have intimate knowledge of each other's lives. Families and networks of close friends are primary groups. During the COVID lockdown, interactional restrictions—such as not being within 6 feet of someone else—were usually eased for members of one's primary group. A **secondary group**, in contrast, is much more formal and impersonal. The group is established for a specific task, such as the production or sale of consumer goods, and members are less emotionally committed to one another. Their roles tend to be highly structured. Primary groups may form within secondary groups, as when close friendships form among coworkers, but in general, secondary groups require less emotional investment than primary groups.

Like societies, groups have a reality that is more than just the sum of their members; a change in a group's membership doesn't necessarily alter its basic structure. Secondary groups can endure changing membership relatively easily if some, or even all, individuals leave and new ones enter—as, for example, when the senior class in a high school graduates and is replaced the following year by a new group of students. However, change in primary groups—perhaps through divorce or death—produces dramatic effects on the structure and identity of the group, even though the group itself still exists.

Although people of the same race, gender, ethnicity, or religion are not social groups in the strictest sense of the term, they function like groups in that members share certain characteristics and interests. They become an important source of a person's identity. For instance, members of a particular racial or ethnic group may organize into a well-defined unit to fight for a political cause. The feelings of "we-ness" or "they-ness" generated by such group membership can be constructive or dangerous, encouraging pride and unity in some cases and anger, bitterness, and hatred toward outsiders in others.

Organizations

At an even higher level of complexity is a social unit called an **organization**, networks of statuses and groups created for a specific purpose. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Harvard University, Google, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Organization for Women, and the Methodist Church are all examples of organizations. Organizations contain groups as well as individuals occupying clearly defined statuses and taking on clearly defined roles.

Some of the groups within organizations are transitory; some are more permanent. For instance, a university consists of individual classes that form at the beginning of a semester and disband at its end, as well as more permanent groups, such as the faculty, administration, secretarial staff, maintenance staff, and alumni.

Large, formal organizations are often characterized by a *hierarchical division of labor*. Each person in an organization occupies a position that has a specific set of duties and responsibilities, and those positions can be ranked according to their relative power and importance. At Subaru, for instance, assembly-line workers typically don't make hiring decisions or set budgetary policies, and the vice president in charge of marketing doesn't spray paint the underbodies of newly assembled Foresters. In general, people occupy certain positions in an organization because they have the skills to do the job required of them. When a person can no longer meet the requirements of the job, they can be replaced without seriously affecting the functioning of the organization.

Organizations are a profoundly common and visible feature of everyday social life, as you'll see in Chapter 9. Most of us cannot acquire food, get an education, pray, undergo lifesaving surgery, or earn a salary without encountering or becoming a member of some organization. To be a full-fledged member of modern society is to be deeply involved in some form of organizational life.

Why do you suppose it's so important that the people in this photo look alike? Do you think that similar appearance means they act and think alike too? Why is it important that their individuality be minimized in this situation? Can you think of times in your own life when your group membership totally overshadowed your individuality? What about the opposite? When do you find yourself emphasizing your individual identity over your group connections? How might a sociologist explain these two different experiences?

David L. Ryan/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

Social Institutions

When stable sets of statuses, roles, groups, and organizations form, they provide the foundation for addressing fundamental societal needs. An enduring pattern of social life is called a **social institution**. Sociologists usually think of institutions as the building blocks that organize

society. They are the patterned ways of solving the problems and meeting the requirements of a particular society. Although there may be conflict over what society "needs" and how best to fulfill those needs, all societies must have some systematic way of organizing the various aspects of everyday life.

Key social institutions in modern society include the family, education, economics, politics and law, and religion. Some sociologists add medicine and health care, the military, and the mass media to the list. I'll be talking about these social institutions throughout the book. But for now, here are some short descriptions:

Family. All societies must have a way of replacing their members, and reproduction is essential to the survival of human society as a whole. Within the institution of family, sexual relations among adults are regulated; people are cared for; children are born, protected, and socialized; and newcomers are provided with an identity—a lineage—that gives them a sense of belonging. Just how these activities are carried out varies from society to society. Indeed, different societies have different ideas about which relationships qualify for designation as family. But the institution of family, whatever its form, remains the hub of social life in virtually all societies (Turner, 1972).

Education. Young people need to be taught what it means to be a member of the society in which they live and how to survive in it. In small, simple societies, the family is the primary institution responsible for socializing new members into the culture. However, as societies become more complex, it becomes exceedingly difficult for a family to teach its members all they need to know to function and survive. Hence, most modern, complex societies have an elaborate system of schools—preschool, primary, secondary, postsecondary, professional—that not only create and disseminate knowledge and information but also train individuals for future careers and teach them their "place" in society.

Economy. From the beginning, human societies have faced the problems of securing enough food and protecting people from the environment (Turner, 1972). Today, modern societies have systematic ways of gathering resources, converting them into goods and commodities, and distributing them to members. In addition, societies provide ways of coordinating and facilitating the operation of this massive process. For instance, banks, accounting firms, insurance companies, stock brokerages, transportation agencies, and computer networks don't produce goods themselves but provide services that make the gathering, producing, and distributing of goods possible. To facilitate the distribution of both goods and services, economic institutions adopt a system of common currency and an identifiable mode of exchange. In some societies, the economy is driven by the value of efficient production and the need to maximize profits; in others, the collective well-being of the population is the primary focus.

Politics and Law. All societies face the problem of how to preserve order, avoid chaos, and make important social decisions. The legal system provides explicit laws or rules of conduct and mechanisms for enforcing those laws, settling disputes, and changing outdated laws or creating new ones (Turner, 1972). These activities take place within a larger system of governance that allocates and acknowledges power, authority, and leadership. In a democracy, the governance process includes the citizens, who have a say in who leads them; in a monarchy, kings or queens

can claim that their birthright entitles them to positions of leadership. In some societies, the transfer of power is efficient and mannerly; in others, it is violent.

Religion. In the process of meeting the familial, educational, economic, and political needs of society, some individuals thrive, whereas others suffer. Hence, all societies also face the problem of providing their less successful members with a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Religion gives individuals a belief system for understanding their existence as well as a network of personal support in times of need. Although many members of a given society may actively reject religion, it remains one of the most enduring and powerful social institutions. Although religion provides enormous comfort to some people, it can also be a source of hatred and irreparable divisions.

Medicine and Health Care. One of the profoundly universal facts of human life is that people get sick and die. In some societies, healing the sick and managing the transition to death involves spiritual or supernatural intervention; other societies rely on science and modern technology. Most modern societies have established a complex system of health care to disseminate medical treatments. Doctors, nurses, hospitals, pharmacies, drug and health equipment manufacturers, medical researchers, public health experts, and patients all play an active role in the health care system.

Military. To deal with the possibility of attack from outside and the protection of national interests, many societies maintain an active military defense. However, militaries are used not only to defend societies but also, at times, to attack other countries to acquire land, resources, or power. In other cases, the military is used for political change, as when U.S. armed forces were mobilized to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003.

Mass Media. In very small, relatively close-knit societies, information can be shared through word of mouth. However, as societies become more complex, the dissemination of information requires a massive coordinated system. The modern mass media—radio, newspapers, television, and the Internet—provide coverage of important societal events so individuals can make informed decisions about their own lives. But the media do more than report events of local, national, and international significance. They also actively mold public opinion and project and reinforce a society's values.

You can see that the social institutions within a society are highly interrelated. Take, for instance, the connections between medicine and economics. A few years ago, a constant stream of studies affirmed the presence of a dangerous "epidemic" in competitive football: traumatic head injuries. It's not uncommon for players—from high school to the pros—to sustain hits to the head equivalent to the impact of a 25-mph car crash. Some studies suggest that as many as 15% of players suffer some type of brain damage each season (as cited in Lehrer, 2012). In 2014, the National Football League (NFL) conceded that brain trauma affects 1 in 3 professional players after their careers end (Belson, 2014). In the past, players who "got their bell rung" were quickly resuscitated after such hits so they could be sent back into the game as quickly as possible. But it's clear now that the brain damage these hits cause can have lasting consequences including long-term memory loss, depression, mood disorders, violence, and suicidal tendencies—a condition known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). According to one study, the risk of fatal degenerative brain disease among former NFL players is three times higher than

same-age, nonfootball players in the general public; the risk of Alzheimer's disease is four times higher (Lehman et al., 2012). In 2017, researchers at Boston University found evidence of CTE in the brains of 110 out of 111 deceased NFL football players (Mez et al., 2017).

But football is a big business with far-reaching economic ties. The 32 NFL teams have a combined value of more than $163 billion, as much as all Major League Baseball and National Basketball Association teams *combined* (*Forbes*, 2023). At the college level, football is the number one revenue-generating activity for most large U.S. universities. So it's not surprising that with such deep economic investments, the football industry has been slow to heed medical research and take any sort of significant step to reduce the game's violence, and hence the likelihood of deadly brain injuries.

To individual members of society, social institutions appear natural, permanent, and inevitable. Most of us couldn't imagine life without a family. Nor could most of us fathom what society would be like without a stable system of government, a common currency, schools to educate our children, or an effective health care system. It is very easy, then, to think that institutions exist independently of people.

But one of the important themes that will be revisited throughout this book is that we each have a role to play in maintaining or changing social institutions, as when citizens alter the political shape of a country by voting out of office an administration with which they've grown displeased. Although the effects of changes can be felt at the organizational and institutional levels, they are ultimately initiated, implemented, or rejected, and, most important, experienced by individual people. The interrelationships between individuals and the various components of social structure can be seen in Figure 2.1.

Institutional influence is sometimes not so obvious. For instance, we usually think of nutrition as an inherent property of the foods we eat. Either something is good for us or it's bad for us, right? And we trust that the nutritional value of certain foods emerges from scientific research and discovery. We rarely consider the economic and political role that food companies play in shaping our tastes and our dietary standards (Pollan, 2007).

Despite alarming levels of hunger and food insecurity around the world (see Chapter 10), the United States produces so much food that we could feed all our citizens twice over. Americans' food portions are famously massive compared to other countries. We have the highest per capita calorie consumption in the world (Food Oddity, 2019). And many of us regularly buy or prepare far more food than we actually need (hence the ubiquity of "doggie bags" and leftovers).

The food industry is therefore highly competitive. But like all major industries, companies are beholden to their stockholders rather than to the consuming public. Marketing foods that are healthy and nutritious is a company's goal only if it can increase sales.

American food and beverage companies spend nearly $1 billion a year marketing directly to children. Most of these marketed products are high in energy, saturated fat, sugars, or sodium with little nutritional value (Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health, 2022). It's estimated that 80% of food and beverage advertising on television, food packaging, and digital platforms promotes unhealthy choices, such as fast food, sugary drinks, and candy (Trust for America's Health, 2023). Kids watching Nickelodeon or Nicktoons are exposed to 10 ads for junk food *per hour* (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2019). By all accounts, such advertising works.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Social Structure and the Individual

For instance, young people's consumption of sugary soft drinks increases 10% with every additional 100 television ads they view.

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released nutritional guidelines for snack foods sold in schools. The guidelines set minimum requirements for calories and fats allowed, encourage schools to offer low-fat and whole-grain snack foods, and limit the availability of sugary drinks. In 2015, the Food and Drug Administration began taking steps to remove artificial trans fat from processed foods, and General Mills removed artificial colors and flavors from its breakfast cereals. In 2020, however, the Trump administration announced plans to roll back U.S. school food nutrition standards, relaxing sodium limits, cutting the required levels of fruit and vegetables, and allowing more hamburgers, pizza, and fries (Dyer, 2020). It also refused to provide any recommendations to place limits on sugar intake.

No matter the ultimate outcome of these or future government actions, soft drink and food companies will likely continue to play a significant role in school district budgets. In this role, we can see how a child's food choices in school are linked deeply and profoundly to broader educational, political, and economic needs—often with less attention paid to nutritional considerations and individual health.

Culture

The most pervasive element of society is **culture**, which consists of the language, values, beliefs, rules, behaviors, and physical artifacts of a society. Think of it as a society's personality. Culture gives us codes of conduct—proper, acceptable ways of doing things. We usually don't think twice about it, yet it colors everything we experience.

Human societies would be chaotic and unlivable if they didn't have cultures that allow people to live together under the same set of general rules. But culture can also sometimes lead to tragedy. In 2012, an independent commission in Japan released the findings of its investigation of the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima power plant following the deadly 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The commission concluded that the disaster was human made and preventable, citing, among other things, certain elements of Japanese culture that suppress dissent and outside opinion. The chair of the commission put it this way:

> What must be admitted, very painfully, is that this was a disaster "Made in Japan." Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to "sticking with the program"; our groupism; and our . . . [narrow-mindedness]. (as quoted in Tabuchi, 2012, p. 7)

Culture is particularly apparent when someone questions it or acts in ways that violates its guidelines. Those who do not believe what the majority believes, see what the majority sees, or obey the same rules the majority obeys are likely to experience punishment, social ostracism, or even psychiatric attention. I will discuss the power of culture in more detail in Chapter 4, but here we should look at two key aspects of culture that are thoroughly implicated in the workings of social structure and social influence: values and norms.

Values

Perhaps no word in the English language carries more baggage than *values*. People throw around terms such as *moral values, traditional values, family values*, and *American values* with little thought as to what they actually mean. Sociologically speaking, a **value** is a standard of judgment by which people decide on desirable goals and outcomes (Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986). Values represent the general criteria on which our lives and the lives of others can be judged. They justify the social rules that determine how we ought to behave. For instance, laws against theft clearly reflect the value we place on ownership of personal property.

Different societies emphasize different values. Success, independence, and individual achievement are seen as important values in U.S. society. In other societies, such as Vietnam, people are more likely to value group obligation and loyalty to family.

Some of the things we profess to value in the abstract may not, in fact, characterize our actual everyday experiences. For instance, we say that honesty and open communication are the foundational values of any strong relationship. But think of how many times you've lied to a romantic partner ("You're a really good cook." or "No, those jeans do *not* make you look fat.")

in order to make them feel better about themselves. As one author put it, "If you want to have love in your life, you'd better be prepared to tell some lies and to believe some lies" (Martin, 2015, p. 4). Likewise, all parents know that lying to their kids about everything from the arrival of Santa Claus to the horrible things that will happen if they don't eat their peas is a key component of raising a child.

Values within a society sometimes come into conflict. The value of privacy ("Stay out of other people's business.") and the value of kindness ("Help others in need.") may clash when we are trying to decide whether to help a stranger who seems to require assistance. Similarly, although the value of cooperation is held in high esteem in contemporary U.S. society, when someone is taking a final exam in a sociology class, cooperation is likely to be defined as cheating. When the key values that characterize a particular social institution come into conflict, the result may be widespread legal and moral uncertainty among individuals.

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION

FAMILY PRIVACY CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO A CHILD'S HEALTH

One such conflict between values in a society involves the cultural value of family privacy. Contemporary U.S. life is built on the assumption that what a family does in the privacy of its home is, or at least should be, its own business. Family life, many people believe, is best left to family members, not to neighbors, the government, the courts, or other public agencies. Consequently, American families are endowed with significant autonomy—the right to make decisions about their future or about treatment of their members (see Chapter 7).

The cultural value we place on the well-being of children can sometimes come into direct conflict with the value of family privacy. Parents have never had complete freedom to do as they wish with their children. For instance, a few years ago, a Florida couple lost custody of their 3-year-old son when they decided to discontinue the child's potentially lifesaving cancer treatment because of the debilitating side effects. When the parents removed the child from the hospital and left the state, the county sheriff's office posted the following message on its Facebook page:

> A three-year-old boy who is believed to be missing and endangered. On April 22, 2019, the parents failed to bring in the child to a medically necessary hospital procedure. The parents have further refused to follow up with the lifesaving medical care the child needs. The parents have possible criminal child neglect charges pending. (as quoted in Flynn, 2019, p. 1)

But such dramatic attempts at interventions are rare. We may be horrified at the thought of a parent neglecting or even beating their child to the point of injury or death. But we're equally horrified, it seems, at the thought of the state intruding on parents' right to raise their children as they see fit. In the United States, parents have the legal right to direct the upbringing of their children, to determine the care they receive, and to use physical means to control their children's behavior. From a sociological perspective, injuring children can sometimes be the extreme outcome of the widely practiced and accepted belief that parents have the right to use physical punishment to discipline their own kids.

Concern with parents' privacy rights is often framed as a freedom-of-religion issue. Consider the controversy over childhood vaccinations. All 50 states have laws requiring specified vaccines for children to enter school. But 45 states grant exemptions for parents who have religious objections to immunizations. And 15 states allow philosophical exemptions for children whose parents object because of their "personal or moral" beliefs (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023). Six states even have statutes that excuse students with religious objections from simply studying about diseases in school (CHILD, 2016).

But it's unclear what ought to be done when parents' religious beliefs result in the injury or death of a child. Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia allow religion as a defense in cases of child abuse or neglect where parents forego medical treatment for their children because it conflicts with their religious beliefs (Sandstrom, 2016). Idaho, Iowa, and Ohio allow religious defenses for manslaughter charges, and Delaware, West Virginia, and Arkansas permit religious defenses in cases of alleged murder (CHILD, 2016). Since Idaho enacted a law in 1971 that parents had the legal right to deprive their children of lifesaving medical care on religious grounds, nearly 200 children have died in families with religious beliefs opposing medical intervention (Idahochildren.org, 2019).

The government does, on occasion, violate the religious privacy of a family. For instance, in 2018, an Oregon couple pleaded guilty to negligent homicide and criminal mistreatment in the death of their newborn daughter. The girl was delivered at home eight weeks premature and had stopped breathing hours after being born. In line with their church's teachings, the couple received no prenatal care and did not seek emergency medical care when the baby stopped breathing. Instead, they relied on prayer to help their daughter. They were the fifth set of parents from this church in the past 9 years to face criminal charges for failing to get medical attention for their children (Swenson, 2018). Such cases illustrate the profound effects of cultural and political values on the everyday lives of individuals. Situations such as these pit the privacy and autonomy of families against society's institutional responsibility to protect children and create new citizens.

Norms

A **norm** is a culturally defined rule of conduct. Norms specify what people should do and how they should pursue values. They tell us what is proper or necessary within particular roles, groups, organizations, and institutions. Thousands of norms guide both the minor and grand details of our lives, from the bedroom to the classroom to the boardroom. You can see, then, that norms serve as the fundamental building blocks of social order.

Norms make our interactions with others reasonably predictable. In nonpandemic times, Americans expect that when they extend a hand to another person, that person will grasp it and a brief handshake will follow. They would be shocked if they held out their hand and the other person spit on it or grabbed it and wouldn't let go. In contrast, people in some societies commonly embrace or kiss each other's cheek as a form of greeting, even when involved in a formal business relationship. A hearty handshake in those societies may be interpreted as an insult. In Thailand, people greet each other by placing the palms of their hands together in front of their bodies and slightly bowing their heads. This greeting is governed by strict norms. Slight differences in the placement of one's hands reflect the social position of the other person—the higher

the hands, the higher the position of the person being greeted. Norms like these make it easier to "live with others" in a relatively harmonious way (see Chapter 4).

Social Structure in a Global Context

A discussion of social structure would not be complete without acknowledging the fact that statuses, roles, groups, organizations, social institutions, and culture are sometimes influenced by broad societal and historical forces at work in the world. One such force with deep implications for contemporary society is **globalization**, the process through which people's lives all around the world become increasingly interconnected—economically, politically, environmentally, and culturally (see Chapter 9 for more detail). For instance, a few years ago, representatives of 170 countries signed a global deal that would phase out the use of hydrofluorocarbons—a substance used in cheap air conditioners that is linked to global climate change. While the move was meant to address the serious consequences of global warming, it had the effect of denying millions of poor people in India—one of the planet's hottest countries—the one affordable appliance they could buy to ease their heat-related suffering (Barry & Davenport, 2016).

The global reach of international financial institutions and foreign governments can be quite extensive. For instance, these entities often provide money to support the building of hydroelectric dams in poor countries. According to the World Commission on Dams, 1,600 such dams in 40 countries were under construction in 2000 (Bald, 2000). These projects were meant to strengthen societies by providing additional energy sources in areas where power was dangerously deficient. However, they frequently transformed individual lives, social institutions, and Indigenous cultures in a negative way. A dam built along the Moon River in Thailand destroyed forests that for centuries were villagers' free source of food, firewood, and medicinal herbs. With the flooding created behind the dam, local farmers lost not only their farmland but also the value of their knowledge of farming methods developed over centuries to adapt to the ebb and flow of the river. A multidam project along the Narmada River in India displaced more than 200,000 people and led to violent protests there. The Manantali Dam in Mali destroyed the livelihood of downstream farmers and has resulted in the spread of waterborne diseases (Fountain, 2005). None of these dams would have been built without the funding and political clout of global financial organizations and foreign corporations.

Cultures have rarely been completely isolated from outside influence. Throughout human history people have been moving from one place to another, spreading goods and ideas. What is different today, though, is the speed and scope of these interactions. Several decades ago, overnight mail service and direct long-distance telephone calls increased the velocity of cross-national communication. Advances in transportation technology have made international trade more cost-effective and international travel more accessible to ordinary citizens. And today, widely available high-speed wireless connectivity has given people around the world instantaneous access to the cultural artifacts and ideals of other societies, no matter where they're located. Through social media and search engines, such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing, children in Beirut, Baltimore, or Beijing can easily and immediately mine unlimited amounts of the same information on every conceivable topic.

Clearly, societies are more interdependent than ever, and that interdependence matters for individuals around the world. Sometimes the effects are positive. Pharmaceutical breakthroughs in the United States or Europe, for instance, can save lives around the world. Globalization gives us a chance to learn about other societies and learn from them. Other times, however, global influence can have disastrous consequences. Many of today's most pressing societal problems—widespread environmental devastation, large- and small-scale wars, economic crises, viral epidemics, and so on—are a function of globalization to some degree. Because of the relative ease of international travel, it only took about 2 months for the novel coronavirus to make its way around the world, forcing the World Health Organization to declare it a *global* pandemic.

In short, it is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to consider ourselves members of a single society unaffected by other societies. All of us are simultaneously members of our own society and citizens of a world community.

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL ORDER

The question of what holds all these elements of society together and how they combine to create social order has concerned sociologists for decades. Sociologists identify three broad intellectual orientations they often use to address this question: structural-functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionism (see Table 2.1). Each of these perspectives has its advantages and shortcomings. Each is helpful in answering particular types of questions. For instance, structural functionalism is useful in showing us how and why large, macrolevel structures, such as organizations and institutions, develop and persist. The conflict perspective sheds light on the various sources of social inequality that exist in our own and other societies. And symbolic interactionism is helpful in explaining how individuals construct meaning to make sense of their social surroundings. At times, the perspectives complement one another; at other times, they contradict one another.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Sociological Perspectives at a Glance

Sociological Perspective	Key Concepts	Main Assumption
Structural functionalism	Manifest and latent functions Dysfunctions Social stability	Social institutions are structured to maintain stability and order in society.
Conflict	Power Inequality Conflict Dominance	The various institutions in society promote inequality and conflict among groups of people.
Symbolic interactionism	Symbolic communication Social interaction Subjective meaning	Society is structured and maintained through everyday interactions and people's subjective definitions of their worlds.

Throughout the remaining chapters of this book, I will periodically return to these three perspectives—as well as several other perspectives—to apply them to specific social phenomena, experiences, and events.

The Structural-Functionalist Perspective

According to sociologists Talcott Parsons and Neil Smelser (1956), two theorists typically associated with the **structural-functionalist perspective**, a society is a complex system composed of various parts, much like a living organism. Just as the heart, lungs, and liver work together to keep an animal alive, so, too, do all the elements of a society's structure work together to keep society alive.

Social institutions play a key role in keeping a society stable. All societies require certain things to survive. They must ensure that the goods and services people need are produced and distributed; they must provide ways of dealing with conflicts between individuals, groups, and organizations; and they must provide ways to ensure that individuals are made a part of the existing culture.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, institutions allow societies to attain their goals, adapt to a changing environment, reduce tension, and recruit individuals into statuses and roles. Economic institutions, for instance, allow adaptation to dwindling supplies of natural resources or to competition from other societies. Educational institutions train people for the future statuses they will need to fill to keep society going. Religions help maintain the existence of society by reaffirming people's values and preserving social ties among individuals (Durkheim, 1915/1954).

Sociologist Robert Merton (1957) distinguishes between manifest and latent functions of social institutions. **Manifest functions** are the intended, obvious consequences of activities designed to help some part of the social system. For instance, the manifest function of going to college is to get an education and acquire the credentials necessary to establish a career. A **latent function** is the *unintended*, sometimes unrecognized, consequence of actions that coincidentally help the system. One of the latent functions of going to college is to meet people and establish close, enduring friendships. In addition, college informally teaches students how to live on their own, away from their parents. It also provides important lessons in negotiating the intricacies of large bureaucracies—registering for classes, filling out forms, learning important school policies—so that students figure out how to "get things done" in an organization. These latent lessons will certainly help students who enter the equally large and bureaucratic world of work after they graduate (Galles, 1989).

From the structural-functionalist perspective, if an aspect of social life does not contribute to society's survival—that is, if it is *dys*functional—it will eventually disappear. Things that persist, even if they seem to be dangerous or disruptive, must somehow be contributing to the survival of society (Durkheim, 1915/1954). Take prostitution, for example. One would assume that a practice so widely condemned and punished is dysfunctional for society. But prostitution has existed since human civilization began. Some structural-functionalists have suggested that prostitution satisfies sexual needs that may not be met through more socially acceptable means, such as marriage. Married customers can have their physical desires secretly satisfied without having to establish the sort of emotional attachment to another person that would

destroy a marriage, harm the institution of family, and ultimately threaten the entire society (Davis, 1937).

Structural functionalism was the dominant theoretical tradition in sociology for most of the 20th century, and it still shapes sociological thinking to a certain degree today. But it has been criticized for accepting existing social arrangements without examining how they might exploit or otherwise disadvantage certain groups or individuals within the society.

The Conflict Perspective

The **conflict perspective** addresses the deficiencies of structural functionalism by viewing the structure of society as a source of inequality that benefits some groups at the expense of other groups. Conflict sociologists are likely to see society not in terms of stability and acceptance but in terms of conflict and struggle. They focus not on how all the elements of society contribute to its smooth operation and continued existence but on how these elements promote divisions and inequalities. Social order arises not from the societal pursuit of harmony but from dominance and coercion. The family, government, religion, and other institutions foster and legitimate the power and privilege of some individuals or groups at the expense of others.

Karl Marx, perhaps the most famous scholar associated with the conflict perspective, focused exclusively on economic arrangements. He argued that all human societies are structured around the production of goods that people need to survive. The individuals or groups who control the means of production—land in an agricultural society, factories in an industrial society, computer networks and information in a postindustrial society—have the power to create and maintain social institutions that serve their interests. Hence, economic, political, and educational systems in a modern society support the interests of those who control the wealth (see Chapter 10).

Marx believed that when resources are limited or scarce, conflict between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is inevitable and creates a situation in which those in power must enforce social order. He said this conflict is not caused by greedy, exploitative individuals; rather, it is a by-product of a system in which those who benefit from inequality are motivated to act in ways that maintain it.

Contemporary conflict sociologists are interested in various sources of conflict and inequality. One version of the conflict perspective that has become particularly popular among sociologists in the past few decades is the **feminist perspective**. Feminist sociologists focus on gender as the most important source of conflict and inequality in social life. Compared with men, women in nearly every contemporary society have less power, influence, and opportunity. In families, especially in industrialized societies, women have traditionally been encouraged to perform unpaid household labor and childcare duties, whereas men have been free to devote their energy and attention to earning money and power in the economic marketplace. Women's lower wages when they do work outside the home are often justified by the assumption that their paid labor is secondary to that of their husbands. But as women in many societies seek equality in education, politics, career, marriage, and other areas of social life, their activities inevitably affect social institutions (see Chapter 12 for more details). The feminist perspective helps us understand the difficulties men and women face in their everyday lives as they experience the changes taking place in society.

Because this perspective focuses so much on struggle and competing interests, it tends to downplay or overlook the elements of society that different groups and individuals share. In addition, its emphasis on inequality has led some critics to argue that it is a perspective motivated by a particular political agenda and not the objective pursuit of knowledge.

Symbolic Interactionism

The structural-functionalist and the conflict perspectives differ in their assumptions about the nature of society, yet both analyze society mostly at the macro or structural level, focusing on societal patterns and the consequences they produce. In contrast, **symbolic interactionism** attempts to understand society and social structure through an examination of the microlevel interactions of people as individuals, pairs, or groups.

These forms of interaction take place within a world of symbolic communication. A **symbol** is something used to represent or stand for something else (Charon, 1998). It can be a physical object (engagement ring, standing for betrothal), a characteristic or property of objects (a rainbow flag, standing for the rights of LGBTQ people), a gesture (a thumb pointed up, standing for "everything's OK"), or a word (the letters d-o-g, standing for a particular type of household pet, or Z-a-m-b-e-z-i, standing for *my* particular pet).

Symbols are created, modified, and used by people through their interactions with others. We concoct them and come to agree on what they should stand for. Our lives depend on such agreement. For instance, imagine how chaotic—not to mention dangerous—automobile travel would be if we didn't all agree that green stands for go and red stands for stop.

Symbols don't bear any necessary connection to nature. Rather, they're arbitrary human creations. There's nothing in the natural properties of "greenness" that automatically determines that green should stand for go. We could have decided long ago that purple meant go. It wouldn't have mattered as long as we all learned and understood this symbol.

Most human behavior is determined not by the objective details of a given situation but by the symbolic meanings people attach to them (Weber, 1947). When we interact with others, we constantly attempt to interpret what they mean and what they're up to. A gentle pat on the shoulder symbolizes one thing if it comes from someone with whom you are romantically involved but something quite different if it comes from your mother or your boss.

Society, therefore, is not a structure that exists independent of human action. It is "socially constructed," emerging from the countless symbolic interactions that occur each day between individuals. Each time I refer to "U.S. society," "the school system," "the global economy," "the threat of terrorism," "the alt-right movement," or "the Upton family" in my casual conversations with others, I am doing my part to reinforce the notion that these are real things. By examining how and why we interact with others, symbolic interactionism reveals how the everyday experiences of people help to construct and maintain social institutions and, ultimately, society itself.

This perspective reminds us that for all its structural elements, society is, in the end, people interacting with one another. But by highlighting these microlevel experiences, symbolic interactionism runs the risk of ignoring the larger social patterns and structures that create the influential historical, institutional, and cultural settings for people's everyday interactions.

CONCLUSION

Living with others, within a social structure, influences many aspects of our everyday lives. But we must be cautious not to overstate the case. Although the fundamental elements of society are not merely the direct expressions of the personalities of individuals, we must also remember that people are more than "robots programmed by social structure" (Swanson, 1992, p. 94).

The lesson I hope you take from this chapter—and, in fact, from the entire book—is that the relationship between the individual and society is reciprocal. One cannot be understood without accounting for the other. Yes, this thing we call "society" touches our lives in intimate, important, and sometimes not altogether obvious ways. And yes, this influence is often beyond our immediate control. But society is not simply a "forbidding prison" that mechanically determines who we are and what we do (Berger, 1963). We as individuals can affect the very social structure that affects us. We can modify role expectations, change norms, create or destroy organizations, revolutionize institutions, and even alter the path of world history.

YOUR TURN

Alcohol occupies an important but problematic place in many societies. We decry its moral evils and physical dangers while simultaneously encouraging its use in times of leisure, celebration, despair, disappointment, anger, and worry.

The physical effects of being "under the influence"—vomiting, hangovers, liver damage—are a biological consequence of the presence of alcohol in the body. When a person's blood alcohol level reaches a certain point, that person will have trouble walking and talking; at a higher level, they will pass out and perhaps even die.

But is the social behavior we see in drunken people likewise reducible to a chemical reaction in the body? The traditional explanation for drunken behavior is that alcohol does something to the brain that reduces inhibitions. If this were true, though, drunken behavior would look the same everywhere. The fact is social behavior under the influence of alcohol can vary from culture to culture. The way people handle themselves when drunk "is determined not by alcohol's toxic assault on the seat of moral judgment, conscience, or the like but by what their society makes of and imparts to them concerning the state of drunkenness" (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, p. 165).

Ask people who grew up in a culture different from yours (e.g., students who grew up in a different country or in a different socioeconomic class or geographic region) how people behave when drunk. Do these behaviors differ from those you've observed? Have them describe their first drunken experience. Are there similarities or differences in how people are introduced to alcohol?

Also ask the same questions of people from different sexes, races, ethnic groups, and age groups. Are there variations in the "drunken experience" within a society? What do these

differences illustrate about the norms and values of these different groups? You might also ask some young children to describe how drunk people act. Are there any similarities in the images they have of drunkenness? Do you consider their ideas about drunkenness accurate? Where do you think their ideas about alcohol come from?

Use the results of these interviews to explain the role of social and societal influence on people's personal lives. Do you think your conclusions can be expanded to other private phenomena, such as sexual activity or religious experiences? Why or why not?

***Note*:** All colleges and universities require that any student research project involving human subjects—even if it just entails asking people questions—be approved by a campus or departmental review committee. For instance, you will probably be required to show that your interviewees have consented to participate and that you've guaranteed that their identities will not be divulged. Make sure you talk to your instructor before proceeding with this exercise to see what steps you have to take in order to have it approved by the appropriate campus committee.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- Although society exists as an objective fact, it is also created, reaffirmed, and altered through the day-to-day interactions of the very people it influences and controls.
- Humans are social beings. We look to others to help define and interpret particular situations. Other people can influence what we see, feel, think, and do.
- Society consists of socially recognizable combinations of individuals—relationships, groups, and organizations—as well as the products of human action—statuses, roles, culture, institutions, and broad societal forces, such as globalization.
- There are three major sociological perspectives. The structural-functionalist perspective focuses on the way various parts of society are structured and interrelated to maintain stability and order. The conflict perspective emphasizes how the various elements of society promote inequality and conflict among groups of people. Symbolic interactionism seeks to understand society and social structure through the interactions of people and the ways in which they subjectively define their worlds.

KEY TERMS

achieved status
ascribed status
coalition
conflict perspective
culture
dyad
feminist perspective
globalization
group
in-groups
latent function
manifest functions
norm
organization

out-groups
primary group
role
role conflict
role strain
secondary group
social institution
society
status
structural-functionalist perspective
symbol
symbolic interactionism
triad
value