

# PART

# I

# Understanding Our Social World

## The Scientific Study of Society

**W**hy are we studying what seems to be common sense? Why would anyone want to study how friends and family get along, how groups work, and where a society fits into the global system? What can we learn from scientifically studying our everyday lives? What exactly does it mean to see the world sociologically? Can sociology make our lives any better as the study of biology or chemistry does through new medications?

Studying sociology takes us on a trip to a deeper level of understanding of ourselves and our social world. The first chapter of this book helps answer two questions: What is sociology, and why study it? The second chapter addresses how sociology began and how sociologists know what they know. Like your sociology professor, this book will argue that sociology is valuable because it gives us new perspectives on our personal and professional lives and because sociological insights and skills can help all of us make the world a better place.

When sociologists make a statement about the social world, how do they know it is true? What perspective or lens might sociologists employ to make sense of their information? For example, when sociologists find that education does not treat all children equally, what can be done about it? What evidence would be considered reliable, valid, dependable, and persuasive to support this statement? By the time you finish reading the first two chapters, you should have an initial sense of what sociology is, how it can help you understand your social world, why the field is worth taking your time to explore, and how sociologists know what they know. We invite you to take a seat and come on a trip through the fascinating field of sociology, our social world.

CHAPTER

1

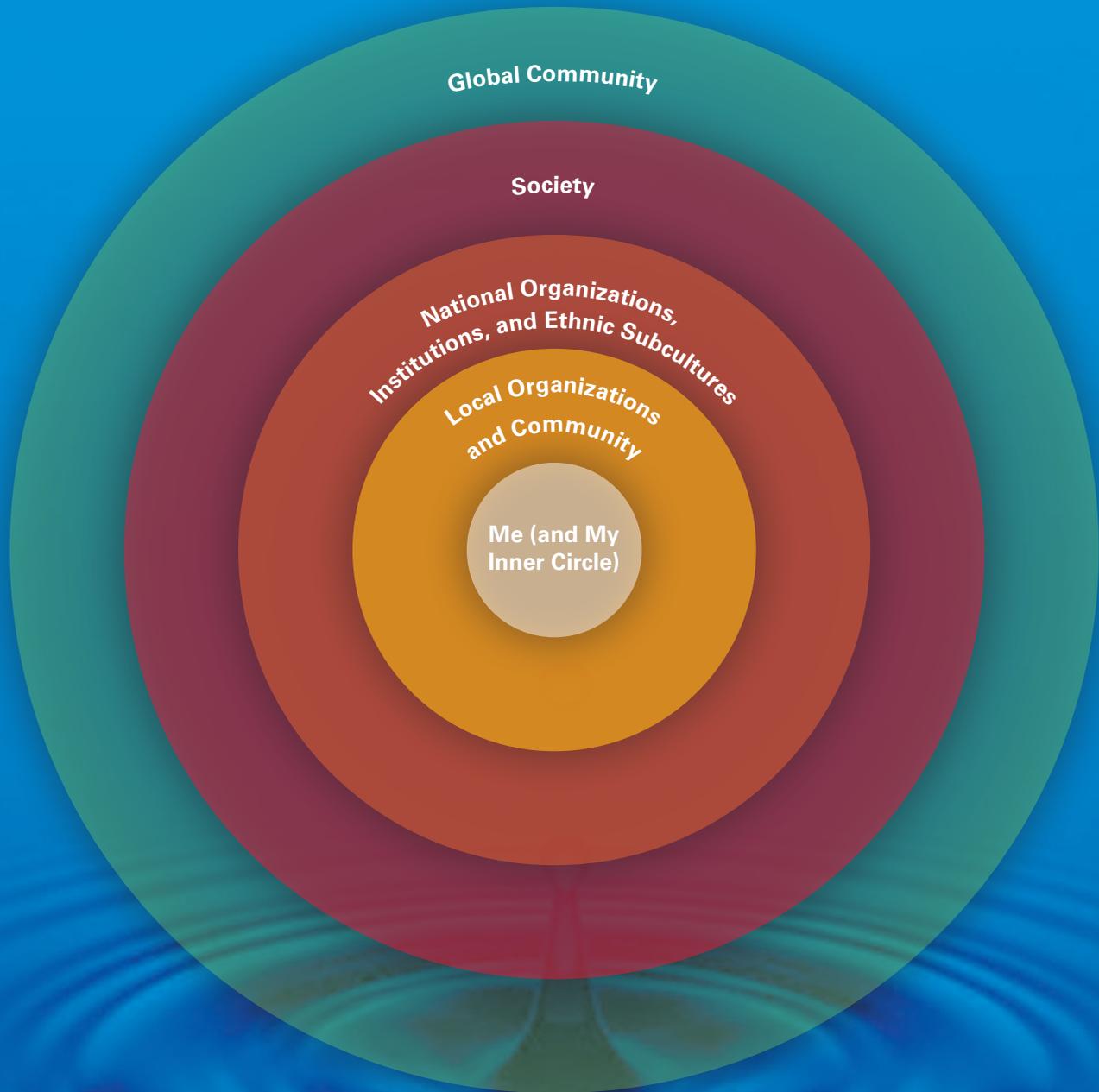
# Sociology

A Unique Way to View the World



Sociology involves a transformation in the way one sees the world—learning to recognize the complex connections of our intimate personal lives with small groups, with large organizations and institutions, and with national and global structures and events.

## Our Social World Model



This model expresses a core idea carried throughout the book—the way in which your own life is embedded in, is shaped by, and influences your family, community, society, and world. It is a critically important reality that can make you a more effective person and a more knowledgeable citizen.

Think About It	
Self and Inner Circle	How can sociology help me understand my own life and my sense of self?
Local Community	How can sociology help me to be a more effective employee and citizen in my community?
National Institutions; Complex Organizations; Ethnic Groups	How do sociologists help us understand and even improve our lives in families, classrooms, and health care offices?
National Society	How do national loyalty and national policies affect my life?
Global Community	How might global events affect my life?

It may win the prize for the strangest place to get a back massage,” but according to a recent scientific article, twins do a good deal of it (Weaver 2010). Scientists studied the movement of five pairs of twin fetuses using ultrasonography, a technique that visualizes internal body structures. By the fourth month of gestation, twin fetuses begin reaching for their “womb-mates,” and by 18 weeks, they spend more time touching their neighbors than themselves or the walls of the uterus. Fetuses that have single-womb occupancy tend to touch the walls of the uterus a good deal to make contact with the mother. Nearly 30% of the movement of twins was directed toward their companions. Movements toward the partner, such as stroking the back of the head, are more sustained and more precise than movements toward themselves, such as touching their own mouths or other facial features. As the authors

put it, they’re “wired to be social” (Castiello et al. 2010). In short, humans are innately social creatures.

Strange as it may seem, the social world is not merely something that exists outside of us. As the twins illustrate, the social world is also something we carry inside of us. We are part of it, we reflect on it, and we are influenced by it, even when we are alone. The patterns of the social world engulf us in ways both subtle and obvious, with profound implications for how we create order and meaning in our lives.

Sometimes it takes a dramatic and shocking event for us to realize just how deeply embedded we are in a social world that we take for granted. “It couldn’t happen in the United States,” read typical world newspaper accounts. “This is something you see in Bosnia, Kosovo, the Middle East, Central Africa, and other war-torn areas. . . . It’s hard to imagine this happening in the economic center of the United States.” Yet on September 11, 2001, shortly after 9 A.M., a commercial airliner crashed into a New York City skyscraper, followed a short while later by another plummeting into the paired tower, causing this mighty symbol of financial wealth—the World Trade Center—to collapse. After the dust settled and the rescue crews finished their gruesome work, nearly 3,000 people were dead or unaccounted for. The world as we knew it changed forever that day. This event taught U.S. citizens how integrally connected they are with the international community.

Following the events of September 11, the United States launched its highly publicized War on Terror, and many terrorist strongholds and training camps were destroyed. Still, troubling questions remain unanswered. Why did this extremist act occur? How can such actions be deterred in the future? How do the survivors recover from such a horrific event? Why was this event so completely disorienting to Americans and to the world community? These terrorist acts horrified people because they were unpredictable and unexpected in a normally predictable world. They violated the rules that foster our connections to one another. They also brought attention to the discontent and disconnectedness that lie under the surface in many societies—discontent that expressed itself in hateful violence. That discontent and hostility is likely to continue until the root causes are addressed.

Terrorist acts represent a rejection of modern civil society (Smith 1994). The terrorists themselves see their acts as



*Within hours after their birth in October 2010, Jackson and Audrey Pietrykowski became highly fussy if the nurses tried to put them in separate bassinets. At one point shortly after birth, both babies were put in a warmer, and Jackson cried until he found Audrey, proceeding to intertwine his arms and legs with hers. Twins, like all humans, are hardwired to be social and in relationships with others.*



*These signs were put up right after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center by people looking for missing loved ones. The experience of New Yorkers was alarm, fear, grief, and confusion—precisely the emotions that the terrorists sought to create. Terrorism disrupts normal social life and daily routines and undermines security. It provides an effective tool for those with no power.*

justifiable, but few outside their inner circle can sympathize with their behavior. When terrorist acts occur, we struggle to fit such events into our mental picture of a just, safe, comfortable, and predictable social world. The events of September 11 forced U.S. citizens to realize that, although they may see a great diversity among themselves, people in other parts of the world view them as all the same. U.S. citizens may also be despised for what they represent, as perceived by others. In other words, terrorists view U.S. citizens as intimately connected. For many U.S. citizens, their sense of loyalty to the nation was deeply stirred by the events of 9/11. Patriotism abounded. So, in fact, the nation's people became more connected as a reaction to an act against the United States.

Most of the time, we live with social patterns that we take for granted as routine, ordinary, and expected. These social patterns, or social facts, characterize social groups. The social expectations are external to each individual (unlike motivations or drives), but they still guide (or constrain) our behaviors and thoughts. Without shared expectations between humans about proper patterns of behavior, life would be chaotic. Connections require some

basic rules of interaction, and these rules create routine and safe normality in everyday interaction. For the people in and around the World Trade Center, the social rules governing everyday life broke down that awful day. How could anyone live in society if there were no rules?

This first chapter examines the social ties that make up our social world, as well as sociology's focus on those ties. We will learn what sociology is and why it is valuable to study it; how sociologists view the social world and what they do; how studying sociology can help us in our everyday life; and how the social world model is used to present the topics we will study throughout this book.

## What Is Sociology?

Whether we are in a coffee shop, in a classroom, in a dining hall, at a party, in our residence hall, at work, or within our home, we interact with other people. Such interactions

are the foundation of social life, and they are the subject of interest to sociologists. According to the American Sociological Association (2002),

**Sociology** is the scientific study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender, and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture; and from the sociology of work to the sociology of sports. (p. 1)

As we shall see, sociology is relevant and applicable to our lives in many ways. Sociologists conduct scientific research on social relationships and problems that range from tiny groups of two people to national societies and global social networks.

Unlike the discipline of psychology, which focuses on attributes, motivations, and behaviors of individuals, sociology tends to focus on group patterns. Whereas a psychologist might try to explain behavior by examining the personality traits of individuals, a sociologist would examine the position of different people within the group and how positions influence what people do. Sociologists seek to analyze and explain why people interact with others and belong to groups, how groups work, who has power and who does not, how decisions are made, and how groups deal with conflict and change. From the early beginnings of their discipline (discussed in Chapter 2), sociologists have

asked questions about the rules that govern group behavior; about the causes of social problems, such as child abuse, crime, and poverty; and about why nations declare war and kill each other's citizens.

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

## Thinking Sociologically

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

## Underlying Ideas in Sociology

All sciences rest on certain fundamental ideas or principles. The idea that one action can cause something else is a core idea in all science—for example, that heavy drinking before driving might cause an automobile accident. Sociology is based on several principles that sociologists take for granted about the social world. These ideas about humans and social life are supported by considerable evidence, but they are no longer matters of debate or controversy—they are assumed at this point to be true. Understanding these core principles helps us see how sociologists approach the study of people in groups.

**People are social by nature.** This means that humans seek contact with other humans, interact with each other, and influence and are influenced by the behaviors of one another. Furthermore, humans need groups to survive. Although a few individuals may become socially isolated



*An athletic team teaches members to interact, cooperate, develop awareness of the power of others, and deal with conflict. Here, children experience ordered interaction in the competitive environment of a football game. What values, skills, attitudes, and assumptions about life and social interaction do you think these young boys are learning?*

as adults, they could not have reached adulthood without sustained interactions with others. The central point here is that we become who we are because other people and groups constantly influence us.

**People live much of their lives belonging to social groups.** It is in social groups that we interact, learn to share goals and to cooperate, develop identities, obtain power, and have conflicts. Our individual beliefs and behaviors, our experiences, our observations, and the problems we face are derived from connections to our social groups.

**Interaction between the individual and the group is a two-way process in which each influences the other.** Individuals can influence the shape and direction of groups; groups provide the rules and the expected behaviors for individuals.

**Recurrent social patterns, ordered behavior, shared expectations, and common understandings among people characterize groups.** A degree of continuity and recurrent behavior is present in human interactions, whether in small groups, large organizations, or society.

**The processes of conflict and change are natural and inevitable features of groups and societies.** No group can remain stagnant and hope to perpetuate itself. To survive, groups must adapt to changes in the social and physical environment. Rapid change often comes at a price. It can lead to conflict within a society—between traditional and new ideas and between groups that have vested interests in particular ways of doing things. Rapid change can give rise to protest activities; changing in a controversial direction or failing to change fast enough can spark conflict, including revolution. The collapse of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and the violence of citizens against what some saw as a corrupt election in Kenya illustrate the demand for change that can spring from citizens' discontent with corrupt or authoritarian rule.

As you read this book, keep in mind these basic ideas that form the foundation of sociological analysis: People are social; they live and carry out activities largely in groups; interaction influences both individual and group behavior; people share common behavior patterns and expectations; and processes such as change and conflict are always present. In several important ways, sociological understandings differ from our everyday views of the social world and provide new lenses for looking at our social world.

## Sociology Versus Common Sense

Human tragedy can result from inaccurate commonsense beliefs. For example, both the Nazi genocide and the existence of slavery have their roots in false beliefs about

racial superiority. Consider for a moment some events that have captured media attention, and ask yourself questions about these events: Why do some families remain poor generation after generation? Are kids from certain kinds of neighborhoods more likely to get into trouble with the law than kids from other neighborhoods? Why do political, religious, and ethnic conflicts exist in the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, the Middle East, and other areas? Our answers to such questions reflect our beliefs and assumptions about the social world. These assumptions often are based on our experiences, our judgments about what our friends and family believe, what we have read or viewed on television, and common stereotypes, which are rigid beliefs, often untested and unfounded, about a group or a category of people.

**Common sense** refers to ideas that are so completely taken for granted that they have never been seriously questioned and seem to be sensible to any reasonable person. Commonsense interpretations based on personal experience are an important means of processing information and deciding on a course of action. Although all of us



*An East German border guard shakes hands with a West German woman through a hole in the Berlin Wall. Although their governments were hostile to one another, the people themselves often had very different sentiments toward those on the other side of the divide.*

hold such ideas and assumptions, that does not mean they are accurate. Sociologists assume human behavior can be studied scientifically; they use scientific methods to test the accuracy of commonsense beliefs and ideas about human

behavior and the social world. Would our commonsense notions about the social world be reinforced or rejected if examined with scientifically gathered information? Many commonsense notions are actually contradictory:

Birds of a feather flock together  
Absence makes the heart grow fonder  
Look before you leap  
You can't teach an old dog new tricks  
Above all to thine own self be true  
Variety is the spice of life  
Two heads are better than one  
You can't tell a book by its cover  
Haste makes waste  
There's no place like home

Opposites attract  
Out of sight, out of mind  
He who hesitates is lost  
It's never too late to learn  
When in Rome, do as the Romans do  
Never change horses in midstream  
If you want something done right, do it yourself  
The clothes make the man  
Strike while the iron is hot  
The grass is always greener on the other side

These are examples of maxims that people use as “absolute” guides to live by. They become substitutes for real analysis of situations. The fact is that all of them are accurate *at some times, in some places, about some things*. Sociological thinking and analysis are about studying the conditions in which they hold and do not hold (Eitzen, Zinn, and Smith 2009).

The difference between common sense and sociology is that sociologists test their beliefs by gathering information and analyzing the evidence in a planned, objective, systematic,

and replicable (repeatable) scientific way. Indeed, they set up studies to see if they can disprove what they think is true. This is the way science is done. Consider the following examples of commonsense beliefs about the social world and some research findings about these beliefs.

## Thinking Sociologically

Do you know any other commonsense sayings that contradict one another? You may also want to take the common sense quiz online at [www.sagepub.com/oswcondensed2e](http://www.sagepub.com/oswcondensed2e).

## Commonsense Beliefs and Social Science Findings

**Belief: Most of the differences in the behaviors of women and men are based on “human nature”; men and women are just plain different from each other.** Research shows that biological factors certainly play a part in the behaviors of men and women, but the culture (beliefs, values, rules, and way of life) that people learn as they grow up determines how biological tendencies are played out. A unique example illustrates this: In the Wodaabe tribe in Africa, women do most of the heavy work while men adorn themselves with makeup, sip tea, and gossip (Beckwith 1983). Variations in behavior of men and women around the world are so great that it is impossible to attribute behavior to biology or human nature alone.



*Wodaabe society in Niger in sub-Saharan Africa illustrates that our notions of masculinity and femininity—which common sense tells us are innate and universal—are actually socially defined, variable, and learned. Wodaabe men are known for their heavy use of makeup to be attractive to women.*

**Belief: As developing countries modernize, the lives of their female citizens improve.**

This is generally false. In fact, the status of women in many developed and developing countries is getting worse. Women make up roughly 51% of the world's approximately 6.8 billion people and account for two thirds of the world's hours-at-work. However, in no country for which data are available do they earn what men earn, and sometimes, the figures show women earning less than 50% of men's earnings for similar work. Women hold many unpaid jobs in agriculture, and they own only 1% of the world's property. Furthermore, of the world's 1 billion illiterate adults, two thirds are women (World Factbook 2009). Only 77% of the world's women over age 15 can read and write compared to 87% of men. Illiteracy rates for women in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East are highest in the world, implying lack of access to education. These are only a few examples of the continuing poor status of women in many countries (Institute for Statistics 2006a; World Factbook 2009; youthxchange 2007).

**Belief: Given high divorce rates in the United States and Canada, marriages are in serious trouble.**

Although the divorce rate in North America is high, the rate of marriage is also one of the highest in the world (Coontz 2005). If the fear-of-commitment hypothesis were true, it is unlikely the marriage rate would be so high. Moreover, even those who have been divorced tend to remarry. Despite all the talk about decline and despite genuine concern about high levels of marital failure, Americans now spend more years of their lives in marriage than at any other time in history. Divorce appears to be seen as rejection of a particular partnership rather than as rejection of marriage itself (Coontz 2005; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1996). The divorce rate reached a peak in the United States in 1982 and has declined modestly since that time (Newman and Grauerholz 2002).

As these examples illustrate, many of our commonsense beliefs are challenged by social scientific evidence. On examination, the social world is often more complex than our commonsense understanding of events, which is based on limited evidence. Throughout history, there are examples of beliefs that seemed obvious at one time but have been shown to be mistaken through scientific study. Social scientific research may also confirm some common notions about the social world. For example, the unemployment rate among African Americans in the United States is higher than that of most other groups; women with similar education and jobs earn less income than men with the same education and jobs; excessive consumption of alcohol is associated with high levels of domestic violence; people tend to marry others who are of a similar social class. The point is that the discipline of sociology provides a method to assess the accuracy of our commonsense assumptions about the social world.



*Literacy is a major issue for societies around the globe. These Chinese children are learning to read, but in many developing countries, boys have more access to formal education than girls have. The commonsense notion is that most children in the world, boys and girls, have equal access to education, yet many children, especially girls, do not gain literacy.*

To improve lives of individuals in societies around the world, decision makers must rely on an accurate understanding of the society. Accurate information gleaned from sociological research can be the basis for more rational and just social policies—policies that better meet the needs of all groups in the social world. The sociological perspective, discussed below, helps us gain reliable understanding.

## Thinking Sociologically

Think of a commonsense belief that you disagree with. Why did you develop this belief?

## The Sociological Perspective and the Sociological Imagination

What happens in the social world affects our individual lives. If we are unemployed or lack funds for our college education, we may say this is a personal problem when often broader social issues are at the root of our situation. The sociological perspective holds that we can best understand

our personal experiences and problems by examining their broader social context—by looking at the big picture.

As sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) explains, individual problems or private troubles are rooted in social or public issues, what is happening in the social world outside of one's personal control. This relationship between individual experiences and public issues is the **sociological imagination**. For Mills, many personal experiences can and should be interpreted in the context of large-scale forces in the wider society.

Consider, for example, the personal trauma caused by being laid off from a job. The unemployed person often experiences feelings of inadequacy or lack of worth. This, in turn, may produce stress in a marriage or even result in divorce. These conditions not only are deeply troubling to the person most directly affected but also are related to wider political and economic forces in society. The unemployment may be due to corporate downsizing or to a corporation taking operations to another country where labor costs are cheaper and where there are fewer environmental regulations on companies. People may blame themselves or each other for personal troubles such as unemployment or a failed marriage, believing that they did not try hard enough. Often, they do not see the connection between their private lives and larger economic forces beyond their control. They fail to recognize the public issues that create private troubles.

Families also experience stress as partners have, over time, assumed increasing responsibility for their mate's and their children's emotional and physical needs. Until the second half of the twentieth century, the community and the extended family unit—aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins—assumed more of that burden. Extended families continue to exist in countries where children settle near their parents, but in modern urban societies, both the sense of community and the connection to the extended family are greatly diminished. There are fewer intimate ties to call on for help and support. Divorce is a very personal condition for those affected, but it can be understood far more clearly when considered in conjunction with the broader social context of economics, urbanization, changing gender roles, lack of external support, and legislated family policies.

As we learn about sociology, we will come to understand how social forces shape individual lives, and this will help us understand aspects of everyday life we take for granted. In this book, we will investigate how group life influences our behaviors and interactions and why some individuals follow the rules of society and others do not. A major goal is to help us incorporate the sociological perspective into our way of looking at the social world and our place in it. Indeed, the notion of sociological imagination—connecting events from the global and national level to the personal and intimate level of our own lives—is the core organizing theme of this book.

## Thinking Sociologically

How does poverty, a war, or a recession cause personal troubles for someone you know? Why is trying to explain the causes of these personal troubles by examining only the personal characteristics of those affected not adequate?

Some sociologists study issues and problems and present their results for others to use. Others become involved in solving the very problems they study. The “Sociology in Your Social World” feature on the next page provides an extension on the sociological imagination, illustrating how some use their sociological knowledge to become involved in their communities or the larger world; these students of sociology advocate an active role in bringing about change.

## Questions Sociologists Ask—and Don't Ask

Sociologists ask questions about human behavior in social groups and organizations—questions that can be studied scientifically. Sociologists, like other scientists, cannot answer certain questions—philosophical questions about the existence of God, the meaning of life, the ethical implications of stem cell research, or the morality of physician-assisted suicide. What sociologists do ask, however, is this: What effect does holding certain ideas or adhering to certain ethical standards have on the behavior and attitudes of people? For example, are people more likely to obey rules if they believe that there are consequences for their actions in an afterlife? What are the consequences—positive and negative—of allowing suicide for terminally ill patients who are in pain? Although sociologists may study philosophical or religious beliefs held by groups, they do not make judgments about what beliefs are right or wrong or about moral issues involving philosophy, religion, values, or opinion. They focus on issues that can be studied objectively and scientifically, rather than those that are judgmental or value based.

Applied sociologists, those who carry out research to help organizations solve problems, agree that the research itself should be as objective as possible. After the research is completed, the applied sociologists might use the research findings to explore policy implications and make recommendations for change.

Consider the following examples of questions sociologists might ask:

- Who gets an abortion, why do they do so, and how does society as a whole view abortion? These are matters of fact that a social scientist can explore. However, sociologists avoid making



## Sociology in Your Social World

### How Will You Spend the Twenty-First Century?

By Peter Dreier

**T**oday, Americans enjoy more rights, better working conditions, better living conditions, and more protection from disease in childhood and old age than anyone could have imagined 100 years ago. . . . But that doesn't let you off the hook! There are still many problems and much work to do. Like all agents for social change, . . . social reformers [such as] Martin Luther King, Jr., [a sociology major] understood the basic point of sociology—that is, to look for the connections between people's everyday personal problems and the larger trends in society. Things that we experience as personal matters—a woman facing domestic violence, or a low-wage worker who cannot afford housing, or middle-class people stuck in daily traffic jams—are really about how our institutions function. Sociologists hold a mirror up to our society and help us see our society objectively. One way to do this is by comparing our own society to others. This sometimes makes us uncomfortable—because we take so much about our society for granted. Conditions that we may consider “normal” may be considered serious problems by other societies. For example, if we compare the United States to other advanced industrial countries such as Canada, Germany, France, Sweden, Australia, Holland, and Belgium, we find some troubling things:

- The United States has the highest per capita income among those countries. At the same time, the United States has, by far, the widest gap between the rich and the poor.
- Almost 30% of American workers work full-time, year-round, for poverty-level wages.
- The United States has the highest overall rate of poverty. More than 33 million Americans live in poverty.
- More than 12 million of these Americans are children. In fact, 1 out of 6 American children is poor. They live in slums and trailer parks, eat cold cereal for dinner, share a bed or a cot with their siblings and sometimes with their parents, and are often one disaster away from becoming homeless.
- Only 3 out of 5 children eligible for the Head Start program are enrolled because of the lack of funding.
- The United States has the highest infant mortality rate among the major industrial nations.
- The United States is the only one of these nations without universal health insurance. More

than 43 million Americans—including 11 million children—have no health insurance.

- Americans spend more hours stuck in traffic jams than people of any of these other countries. This leads to more pollution, more auto accidents, and less time spent with families.
- Finally, the United States has a much higher proportion of our citizens in prison than any of these societies. . . .

. . . What would you like your grandchildren to think about how you spent the twenty-first century? . . . No matter what career you pursue, you have choices about how you will live your lives. As citizens, you can sit on the sidelines and merely be involved in your society, or you can decide to become really committed to making this a better world.

Today, there are hundreds of thousands of patriotic Americans committed to making our country live up to its ideals. . . . They are asking the same questions that earlier generations of active citizens asked: Why can't our society do a better job of providing equal opportunity, a clean environment, and a decent education for all? They know there are many barriers and obstacles to change, but they want to figure out how to overcome these barriers and to help build a better society.

So ask yourselves: What are some of the things that we take for granted today that need to be changed? What are some ideas for changing things that today might seem “outrageous” but that—25 or 50 or 100 years from now—will be considered common sense?

. . . A record number of college students today are involved in a wide variety of “community service” activities—such as mentoring young kids in school, volunteering in a homeless shelter, or working in an AIDS hospice. As a result of this student activism, more than 100 colleges and universities have adopted “anti-sweatshop” codes of conduct for the manufacturers of clothing that bear the names and logos of their institutions.

Positive change is possible, but it is not inevitable. . . . I am optimistic that your generation will follow a lifelong commitment to positive change.

I know you will not be among those who simply “see things the way they are and ask: why?” Instead, you will “dream things that never were and ask: why not?” [Robert Kennedy].

ethical judgments about whether abortion is right or wrong. Such a judgment is a question of values, not one that can be answered through scientific analysis. The question about the morality of abortion is very important to many people, but it is based on philosophical or theological rationale, not on sociological findings.

- Who is most beautiful? Cultural standards of beauty impact individual popularity and social interaction, and this issue interests some social scientists. However, the sociologist would not judge which individuals are more or less attractive. Such questions are matters of aesthetics, a field of philosophy and art.
- What are the circumstances around individuals becoming drunk and drunken behavior? This question is often tied more to social environment than to alcohol itself. Note that a person might be very intoxicated at a fraternity party but behave differently at a wedding reception, where the expectations for behavior are very different. The researcher does not make judgments about whether use of alcohol is good or bad or right or wrong and avoids—as much as possible—opinions regarding responsibility or irresponsibility. The sociologist does, however, observe variations in the use of alcohol in social situations and resulting behaviors. An applied sociologist researching alcohol use on campus for a college or for a national fraternity may, following the research, offer advice based on that research about how to reduce the number of alcohol-related deaths or sexual assault incidents on college campuses (Sweet 2001).

Sociologists learn techniques to avoid letting their values influence their research designs, data gathering, and analysis. Still, complete objectivity is difficult at best, and what one chooses to study may be influenced by one's interests and concerns about injustice in society. The fact that sociologists know they will be held accountable by other scientists for the objectivity of their research is a major factor in encouraging them to be objective when they do their research.

## Thinking Sociologically

From the information you have just read, what are some questions sociologists might ask about divorce or cohabitation or same-sex unions? What are some questions sociologists *would not* ask about these topics, at least while in their roles as researchers?



*What is acceptable or unacceptable drinking behavior varies according to the social setting. Binge drinking, losing consciousness, vomiting, or engaging in sexual acts while drunk may be a source of storytelling at a college party but be offensive at a wedding reception. Sociologists study different social settings and how the norms of acceptability vary in each, but they do not make judgments about those behaviors.*

## The Social Sciences: A Comparison

Not so long ago, our views of people and social relationships were based on stereotypes, intuition, superstitions, supernatural explanations, and traditions passed on from one generation to the next. Natural sciences first used the scientific method, a model later adopted by social sciences. Social scientists, including anthropologists, psychologists,

economists, cultural geographers, historians, and political scientists, apply the scientific method to study social relationships, to correct misleading and harmful misconceptions about human behaviors, and to guide policy decisions. Consider the following examples of specific studies a social scientist might conduct. These are followed by a brief description of the focus of sociology as a social science.

One anthropological study focused on garbage, studying what people discard to understand their patterns of life. Anthropology is closely related to sociology. In fact, the two areas have common historical roots. *Anthropology* is the study of humanity in its broadest context. There are four subfields within anthropology: physical anthropology (which is related to biology), archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology (sometimes called *ethnology*). This last field has the most in common with sociology. Cultural anthropology focuses on the culture, or way of life, of the society being studied and uses methods appropriate to understanding culture.

After wiring research subjects to a machine that measures their physiological reaction to a violent film clip, a psychologist asks them questions about what they were feeling. *Psychology* is the study of individual behavior and mental processes (e.g., sensation, perception, memory, and thought processes). It differs from sociology in that it focuses on individuals, rather than on groups, institutions, and societies as sociology does. Although there are different branches of psychology, most psychologists are concerned with what motivates individual behavior, personality attributes, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. Psychologists also explore abnormal behavior, the mental disorders of individuals, and stages of normal human development (Wallerstein 1996; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2004).

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

An economist studies the banking system and market trends, trying to determine what will remedy the global recession. *Economists* analyze economic conditions and explore how people organize, produce, and distribute material goods. They are interested in supply and demand, inflation and taxes, prices and manufacturing output, labor organization, employment levels, and comparisons of industrial and nonindustrial nations.



*Psychology as a discipline tends to focus on individuals, including such fields as sensation, perception, memory, and thought processes. In this study, the researcher is using some equipment and a computer to measure how the eye and the brain work together to help create depth perception.*

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

## Thinking Sociologically

Consider other issues such as the condition of poverty in developing countries or homelessness in North America. What question(s) might different social sciences ask about these problems?

## Why Study Sociology . . . and What Do Sociologists Do?

Did you ever wonder why some families are close and others are estranged? Why some work groups are very productive while others are not? Why some people are rich and

others remain impoverished? Why some people engage in criminal behaviors and others conform rigidly to rules? Although sociologists do not have all the answers to such questions, they do have the perspective and methods to search for a deeper understanding of these and other patterns of human interaction.

Two ingredients are essential to the study of our social world: a keen ability to observe what is happening in the social world and a desire to find answers to the question of why it is happening. The value of sociology is that it affords us a unique perspective from which to examine the social world, and it provides the methods to study systematically important questions about human interaction, group behavior, and social structure. The practical significance of the sociological perspective is that it

- fosters greater self-awareness, which can lead to opportunities to improve one's life;
- encourages a more complete understanding of social situations by looking beyond individual explanations to include group analyses of behavior;
- helps people understand and evaluate problems by enabling them to view the world systematically and objectively rather than in strictly emotional or personal terms;
- cultivates an understanding of the many diverse cultural perspectives and how cultural differences are related to behavioral patterns;
- provides a means to assess the impact of social policies;
- reveals the complexities of social life and provides methods of inquiry to study them; and
- provides useful skills in interpersonal relations, critical thinking, data collection and analysis, problem solving, and decision making.

This unique perspective has practical value as we carry out our roles as workers, friends, family members, and citizens. For example, an employee who has studied sociology may better understand how to work with groups and how the structure of the workplace affects individual behavior, how to approach problem solving, and how to collect and analyze data. Likewise, a schoolteacher trained in sociology may have a better understanding of classroom management, student motivation, causes of poor student learning that have roots outside the school, and other variables that shape the professional life of teachers and the academic success of students. Consider the example in "Sociology in Your Social World," which explores how high school groups such as "jocks" and "burnouts" behave and why each clique's behavior might be quite logical in certain circumstances. *Burnouts and Jocks in a Public High School* explores a social environment very familiar to most of us, the social cliques in a high school.

## What Sociologists Do

Sociologists are employed in a variety of settings. Although students may first encounter them as teachers and researchers in higher education, sociologists also hold nonacademic, applied sociology jobs in social agencies, government, and business. Table 1.1 illustrates that a significant portion of sociologists work in business, government, and social service agencies (American Sociological Association 2006; Dotzler and Koppel 1999).

**Table 1.1** Where Sociologists Are Employed

Places of Employment	Percentage Employed
College or university	75.5
Government (all positions)	7.1
Private, for-profit business	6.2
Not-for-profit public service organizations	7.6
Self-employed	0.4

Source: Spalter-Roth & Van Vooren (2008).

College graduates who seek employment immediately after college (without other graduate work) are most likely to find their first jobs in social services, administrative assistantships, or some sort of management position. The areas of first jobs of sociology majors are indicated in Figure 1.1 on page 16. With a master's or a doctorate degree, graduates usually become college teachers, researchers, clinicians, and consultants.

Consider your professor. The duties of professors vary depending on the type of institution and the level of courses offered. Classroom time fills only a portion of the professor's working days. Other activities include preparing for classes, preparing and grading exams and assignments, advising students, serving on committees, keeping abreast of new research in the field, and conducting research studies and having them published. This "publish or perish" task is deemed the most important activity for faculty in some major universities.

In businesses, applied sociologists use their knowledge and research skills in human resources or to address organizational needs or problems. In government jobs, they provide data such as population projections for education and health care planning. In social service agencies, such as police departments, they help address deviant behavior, and in health agencies, they may be concerned with doctor-patient interactions. Applied sociology is an important aspect of the field; you will find featured inserts in some chapters discussing the work of an applied sociologist.



## Sociology in Your Social World

### Burnouts and Jocks in a Public High School



**H**igh schools are big organizations made up of smaller friendship networks and cliques; a careful examination can give us insight into the tensions that exist as the groups struggle for resources and power in the school.

Sociologist Penelope Eckert (1989) focused on two categories of students that exist in many high schools in North America: “burnouts” and “jocks.” The burnouts defied authorities, smoked in the restrooms, refused to use their lockers, made a public display of not eating in the school cafeteria, and wore their jackets all day. Their open and public defiance of authority infuriated the jocks—the college prep students who participated in choir, band, student council, and athletics and who held class offices. The burnouts were disgusted with the jocks. In their view, by constantly sucking up to the authorities, the jocks received special privileges and, by playing the goody-two-shoes role, made life much more difficult for the burnouts.

Despite their animosity toward one another, the goal of both groups was to gain more autonomy from the adult authorities who constantly bossed students around. As the burnouts saw things, if the jocks would have even a slight bit of backbone and stand up for the dignity of students as adults, life would be better for everyone.

The burnouts believed that school officials should earn their obedience. The burnouts maintained their dignity by affirming that they did not recognize bossy adults as authorities. Wearing coats all day was another way to emphasize the idea that “I’m just a visitor in this school!”

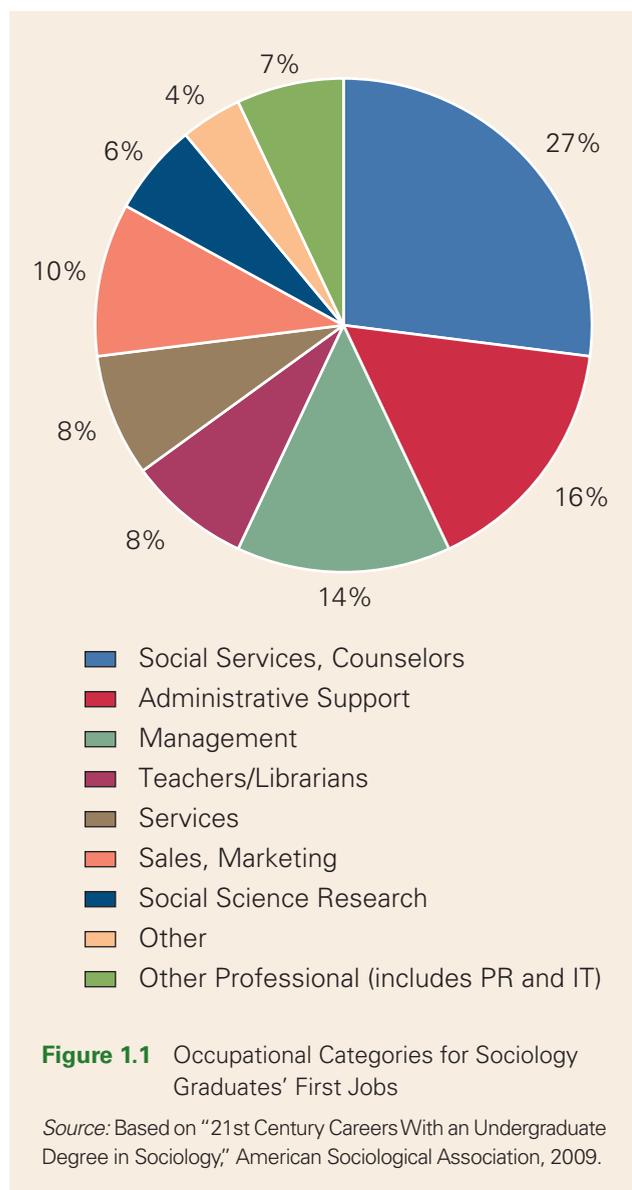
The jocks, for their part, became irritated at the burnouts when they caused trouble and were belligerent with authorities; then the administration would crack down on everyone, and no one had any freedom. Jocks found that if they did what the adults told them to do—at least while the adults were around—they got a lot more freedom. When the burnouts got defiant, however, the principal got mad and removed everyone’s privileges.

Sociologist Eckert (1989) found that the behavior of both groups was quite logical for their circumstances and ambitions. Expending energy as a class officer or participating in extracurricular activities is a rational behavior for college preparatory students because those leadership roles help students get into their college of choice.

However, those activities do not help students get a better job in a factory in town. In fact, hanging out at the bowling alley makes far more sense. For the burnouts, having friendship networks and acquaintances in the right places is more important to achieving their goals than a class office listed on their résumé.

Eckert’s (1989) method of gathering information was effective in showing how the internal dynamics of schools—conflicts between student groups—were influenced by outside factors such as working- and upper-middle-class status. Recent research upholds Eckert’s findings on the importance cliques play in shaping school behavior. Like Eckert, Bonnie Barber, Jacquelynne Eccles, and Margaret Stone (2001) followed various friendship cliques starting in 10th grade in a Michigan high school. The jocks in their study were the most integrated to mainstream society in adult life. The burnouts (or criminals, as they are labeled in Barber’s research) were most likely to have been arrested or incarcerated, showing that the propensity to defy authority figures may carry on into adult life.

These studies show that sociological analysis can help us understand some ways that connections between groups—regardless of whether they are in conflict or harmony—shape the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of people living in this complex social world.



These examples will provide a picture of what one can do with a sociology degree. In addition, at the end of some chapters you will find a section discussing policy examples and implications related to that chapter topic. Table 1.2 provides some ideas of career paths for graduates with a degree in sociology.

## What Employers Want and What Sociology Majors Bring to a Career

Sociologists and other social scientists have studied what job skills and competencies employers seek in new employees, in addition to subject matter expertise. They tend to

focus on writing, speaking, analytical skills—especially when faced with complex problems, comprehension of other cultures and of diversity within the United States, ability to work effectively in diverse teams, and ability to gather and interpret quantitative information. As Table 1.3 indicates, employers want more of these kinds of skills from college graduates.

The following skills and competencies are part of most sociological training:

1. Communication skills (listening, verbal and written communication, working with peers, and effective interaction in group situations)
2. Analytical and research skills
3. Computer and technical literacy (basic understanding of computer hardware and software programs)
4. Flexibility, adaptability, and multitasking (ability to set priorities, manage multiple tasks, adapt to changing situations, and handle pressure)
5. Interpersonal skills (working with coworkers)
6. Effective leadership skills (ability to take charge and make decisions)
7. Sensitivity to diversity in the workplace and with clients
8. Organizing thoughts and information and planning effectively (ability to design, plan, organize, and implement projects and to be self-motivated)
9. Ability to conceptualize and solve problems and be creative (working toward meeting the organization's goals)
10. Working with others (ability to work toward a common goal)
11. Personal values (honesty, flexibility, work ethic, dependability, loyalty, positive attitude, professionalism, self-confidence, willingness to learn) (Hansen and Hansen 2003)

These competencies reflect skills stressed in the sociology curriculum: an ability to understand and work with others, research and computer skills, planning and organizing skills, oral and written communication skills, and critical thinking skills (WorldWideLearn 2007).

We now have a general idea of what sociology is and what sociologists do. It should be apparent that sociology is a broad field of interest; sociologists study all aspects of human social behavior. The next section of this chapter shows how the parts of the social world that sociologists study relate to each other, and it outlines the model you will follow as you continue to learn about sociology.

**Table 1.2** What Can You Do With a Sociology Degree?

<b>Business or Management</b>	<b>Human Services</b>	<b>Education</b>
Market researcher	Social worker	Teacher
Sales manager	Criminologist	Academic research
Customer relations	Gerontologist	Administration
Manufacturing representative	Hospital administrator	School counselor
Banking or loan officer	Charities administrator	Policy analyst
Data processor	Community advocate or organizer	College professor
Attorney		Dean of student life
<b>Research</b>	<b>Government</b>	<b>Public Relations</b>
Population analyst	Policy advisor or administrator	Publisher
Surveyor	Labor relations	Mass communications
Market researcher	Legislator	Advertising
Economic analyst	Census worker	Writer or commentator
Public opinion pollster	International agency representative	Journalist
Interviewer	City planning officer	
Policy researcher	Prison administrator	
Telecommunications researcher	Law enforcement	
	FBI agent	
	Customs agent	

*Note:* Surveys of college alumni with undergraduate majors in sociology indicate that this field of study prepares people for a broad range of occupations. Notice that some of these jobs require graduate or professional training. For further information, contact your department chair or the American Sociological Association in Washington, DC, for a copy of *Careers in Sociology*, 6th edition (2002).

**Table 1.3** Percentage of Employers Who Want Colleges to “Place More Emphasis” on Essential Learning Outcomes

<b>Knowledge of Human Culture</b>	
• Global Issues	72%
• The role of the United States in the world	60%
• Cultural values and traditions—U.S. and global	53%
<b>Intellectual and Practical Skills</b>	
• Teamwork skills in diverse groups	76%
• Critical thinking and analytic reasoning	73%
• Written and oral communication	73%
• Information literacy	70%
• Complex problem solving	64%
• Quantitative reasoning	60%
<b>Personal and Social Responsibility</b>	
• Intercultural competence (teamwork in diverse groups)	76%
• Intercultural knowledge (global issues)	72%

*Source:* American Sociological Association (2009).

## Thinking Sociologically

What are some advantages of mayors, legislators, police chiefs, or government officials making decisions based on information gathered and verified by sociological research rather than on their own intuition or assumptions?

## The Social World Model

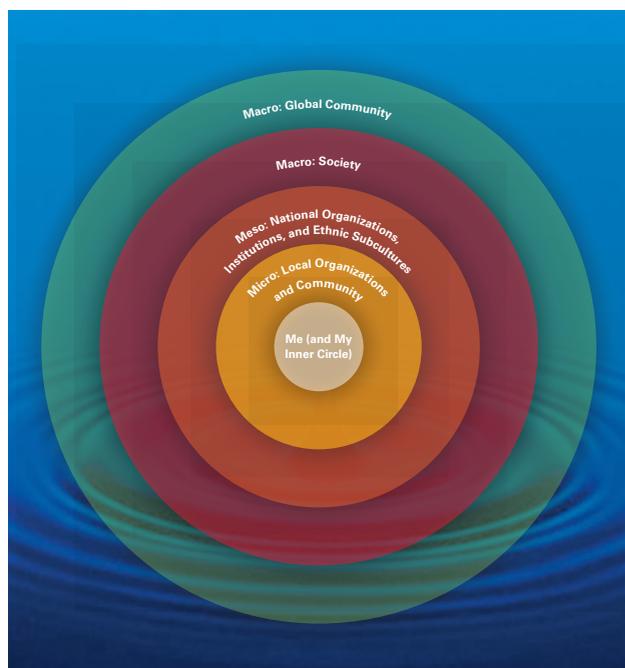
Think about the different groups you depend on and interact with on a daily basis. You wake up to greet members of your family or your roommate. You go to a larger group—a class—that exists within an even larger organization—the college or university. Understanding sociology and comprehending the approach of this book requires a grasp of **levels of analysis**, social groups from the smallest to the largest. It may be relatively easy to picture small groups, such as a family, a sports team, or a sorority or fraternity. It is more difficult to visualize large groups such as corporations—the



*These men carry the supplies for a new school to be built in their local community—Korphe, Pakistan. The trek of more than 20 miles up mountainous terrain was difficult, but their commitment to neighbors and children of the community made it worthwhile. The project was a local one (micro level), but it also was made possible by an international organization—Central Asia Institute—founded as a charitable organization by Greg Mortenson of Montana.*

Gap, Abercrombie & Fitch, Eddie Bauer, General Motors Corporation, or Starbucks—or organizations such as local or state governments. The largest groups include nations or international organizations, such as the sprawling networks of the United Nations or the World Trade Organization. Groups of various sizes shape our lives. Sociological analysis requires that we understand these groups at various levels of analysis.

The **social world model** helps us picture the levels of analysis in our social surroundings as an interconnected series of small groups, organizations, institutions, and societies. Sometimes, these groups are connected by mutual support and cooperation, but sometimes, there are conflicts and power struggles over access to resources. What we are asking you to do here and throughout this book is to develop a sociological imagination—the basic lens used by sociologists. Picture the social world as a linked system made up of increasingly larger circles. To understand the units or parts in each circle of the social world model, look at the social world model shown on this page:



This social world model will be used throughout our book to illustrate how each topic fits into the big picture, our social world. No social unit of our social world can stand alone. All units affect each other, either because they serve needs of other units in the system or because of intense conflict and tension affecting different units. The social world is organized into two parts—structures and processes. Now, let us take a trip through our social world.

## Social Structures

The social world model is made up of a number of **social units**, interconnected parts of the social world. These range from interaction in dyads and small groups to negotiating between warring societies. All these units combine into a system to form the **social structure** that holds societies together and brings order to our lives by regulating the way the units work in combination. Compare this to a picture of our body's skeleton, which governs how our limbs are attached to the torso and how they move.

Sometimes the interconnections in the social structure conflict, however, due to divergent beliefs or self-interests of units. For example, a religion that teaches that it is wrong to have blood transfusions may conflict with the health care system regarding how to save the life of a child. Business executives want to produce products at the lowest possible cost, but this may mean paying workers low wages and causing damage to the environment. All levels of analysis are linked. Some links are supportive; others are in conflict.

**Social institutions** are found in every society—family, education, religion, politics, economics, science, sports, and health care. They provide the rules, roles, and relationships to meet human needs and guide human behavior. They are the parts of the social structure in societies through which organized social activities take place, and they provide the setting for activities essential to human and societal survival. For example, we cannot survive without an economic institution to provide guidelines and a structure for meeting our basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Likewise, we would never make it to adulthood as functioning members of society without the family, the most basic of all institutions. Like the system of organs that make up our bodies—heart, lungs, kidneys, bladder—all social institutions are interrelated. Just as a change in one part of the body affects all others, a change in one institution affects the others.

The **national society**, one of the largest social units in our model, includes a population of people, usually living within a specified geographic area, who are connected by common ideas and are subject to a particular political authority. It also features a social structure with groups and institutions. Although a national society is one of the largest social units, it is still a subsystem of the interdependent global system. France, Kenya, Brazil, and Laos are all national societies on separate continents, but they are linked

as part of the global system of nations. In addition to having relatively permanent geographic and political boundaries, national societies also have one or more languages and a way of life. In most cases, national societies involve countries or large regions where the inhabitants share a common identity as members. In certain other instances, such as contemporary Great Britain, a single national society may include several groups of people who consider themselves distinct nationalities (Welsh, English, Scottish, and Irish within the United Kingdom). Such multicultural societies may or may not be harmonious.

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## Thinking Sociologically

Think about how a major conflict or change in your family (micro level) might affect your education, economic situation, or health care. How might change in one national institution such as health care affect change in another institution (such as the family or the economy)?

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## Social Processes

Picture **social processes** as the actions taken by people in social units. Processes keep the social world working, much as the beating heart keeps the body working. Consider the processes of socialization and stratification. The process of socialization teaches individuals how to become productive members of society. It takes place through actions of families, educational systems, religious organizations, and other social units. Socialization is essential for the continuation of any society. Similarly, our social positions in society are the result of stratification, the process of layering people into social strata based on such factors as birth, income, occupation, and education.

Sociologists generally do not judge these social processes as good or bad. Rather, sociologists try to identify and explain processes that take place within social units. Picture these processes as overlying and penetrating our whole social world, from small groups to societies. Social units would be lifeless without the action brought about by social processes, just as body parts would be lifeless without the processes of electrical impulses shooting from the brain to each organ or the oxygen transmitted by blood coursing through our arteries to sustain each organ.

## The Environment

Surrounding each social unit is an **environment**. It includes everything that influences the social unit, such as its physical and organizational surroundings and technological



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

innovations. Each unit has its own environment to which it must adjust, just as each individual has a unique social world, including family, friends, and other social units that make up the immediate environment. Some parts of the environment are more important to the social unit than others. Your local church, synagogue, or mosque is located in a community environment. That religious organization may seem autonomous and independent, but it depends on its national organization for guidelines and support, the local police force to protect the building from vandalism, and the local economy to provide jobs to members so that the members, in turn, can support the organization. If the religious education program is going to train children to understand the scriptures, the local schools are needed

to teach the children to read. A religious group may also be affected by other religious bodies, competing with one another for potential members from the community. These religious groups may work cooperatively—organizing a summer program for children or jointly sponsoring a holiday celebration—or they may define one another as evil, each trying to stigmatize the other. Moreover, one local religious group may be composed primarily of professional and business people, and another group mostly of laboring people. The religious groups may experience conflict in part because they each serve different socioeconomic constituencies.

The point is that to understand a social unit or the human body, we must consider the structure and processes within the unit, as well as the interaction with the surrounding environment. No matter what social unit the sociologist studies, the unit cannot be understood without considering the interaction of that unit with its unique environment.

Perfect relationships or complete harmony between the social units is unusual. Social units are often motivated by self-interests and self-preservation, with the result that they compete with other groups and units for resources (time, money, skills, energy of members). Therefore, social units within the society are often in conflict. Whether groups are in conflict or mutually supportive does not change their interrelatedness; units are interdependent. The nature of that interdependence is likely to change over time and can be studied using the scientific method.

## Studying the Social World: Levels of Analysis

Picture for a moment your sociology class as a social unit in your social world. Students (individuals) make up the class, the class (a small group) is offered by the sociology department, the sociology department (a large group) is part of the college or university, the university (an organization) is located in a community and follows the practices approved by the social institution (education) of which it is a part, and education is an institution located within a nation. The practices the university follows are determined by a larger accrediting unit that provides guidelines and oversight for institutions. The national society, represented by the national government, is shaped by global events—technological and economic competition between nations, natural disasters, global warming, wars, and terrorist attacks. Such events influence national policies and goals, including policies for the educational system. Thus, global tensions and conflicts may shape the curriculum that the individual experiences in the sociology classroom.

Each of these social units—from the smallest (the individual student) to the largest (society and the global system)—is referred to as a level of analysis (see Table 1.4).

**Table 1.4** The Structure of Society and Levels of Analysis

	<i>Level</i>	<i>Parts of Education</i>
<b>Micro-level analysis</b>	Interpersonal	Sociology class; study group cramming for an exam
	Local organizations	University; sociology department
<b>Meso-level analysis</b>	Organizations and institutions	State boards of education; National Education Association
	Ethnic groups within a nation	Islamic madrassas or Jewish yeshiva school systems
<b>Macro-level analysis</b>	Nations	Policy and laws governing education
	Global community	World literacy programs

These levels are illustrated in the social world model at the beginning of each chapter, and relation to that chapter's content is shown through examples in the model.

### **MICRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS**

Sometimes, sociologists ask questions about face-to-face interactions in dyads or small groups. A focus on individual or small-group interaction entails **micro-level analysis**. Micro-level analysis is important because face-to-face interaction forms the basic foundation of all social groups and organizations to which we belong, from families to corporations to societies. We are members of many groups at the micro level.

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

Another explanation for remaining in the abusive relationship is that the person may have been brought up in a family situation where battering was an everyday part of life. However unpleasant and unnatural this may seem to outsiders, it may be seen by the abuser or by the abused as a “normal” and acceptable part of intimate relationships.

Another possibility is that an abused woman may fear that her children will be harmed or that she will be harshly judged by her family or church if she “abandons” her mate. She may have few resources to make leaving the abusive situation possible. To study each of these possible explanations involves analysis at the micro level because each focuses on interpersonal interaction factors rather than on society-wide trends or forces. Meso-level concerns lead to quite different explanations for abuse.

### **MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS**

Analysis of intermediate-size social units, called **meso-level analysis**, involves looking at units smaller than the nation but larger than the local community or even the region. This level includes national institutions (e.g., the economy of a country, the national educational system, or the political system within a country); nationwide organizations (e.g., a political party, a soccer league, or a national women's rights organization); nationwide corporations (e.g., Ford Motor Company or IBM); and ethnic groups that have an identity as a group (e.g., Jews, Mexican Americans, or the Lakota Sioux in the United States). Organizations, institutions, and ethnic communities are smaller than the nation or global social forces, but they are still beyond the everyday personal



*This photo depicts the damage following the catastrophic earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12, 2010. This event not only changed the lives of people in Haiti—one of the poorest countries in the world—but had ripple effects on economic exchange, relief efforts around the globe, and international trade. Those, in turn, can affect the cost of various products such as the foods you put on your table.*

experience and control of individuals, unless those individuals organize to collectively change these structures. They are intermediate in the sense of being too large to know everyone in the group, but they are not nation-states at the macro level. Consider the fact that it is easier to bring about change in a state in the United States, a province in Canada, or a prefecture in Japan than the national bureaucracies of countries.

In discussing micro-level analysis, we used the example of domestic violence. We must be careful not to “blame the victim”—in this case, the abused person—for getting into an abusive relationship and for failing to act in ways that stop the abuse. To avoid blaming victims for their own suffering, many social scientists look for broader explanations of spousal abuse, such as the social conditions at the meso level of society that cause the problem (Straus and Gelles 1990). When a pattern of behavior in society occurs with increasing frequency, it cannot be understood solely from the point of view of individual cases or micro-level causes. For instance, sociological findings show that fluctuations in spousal or child abuse are related to levels of unemployment. Frustration resulting in abuse erupts within families when poor economic conditions make it nearly impossible for people to find stable and reliable means of supporting themselves and their families. Economic issues must be addressed if violence in the home is to be lessened.

## MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Studying the largest social units in the social world, called **macro-level analysis**, involves looking at entire nations, global forces, and international social trends. Macro-level analysis is essential to our understanding of how larger social forces, such as global events, shape our everyday lives. A natural disaster such as the 2005 tsunami in Indonesia, the heat waves of summer 2006 in Europe, the floods in the United States in the summer of 2008 and winter of 2009, or frequent earthquakes around the world may change the foods we are able to put on our family dinner table because much of our cuisine is now imported from other parts of the world. Map 1.1 shows some of the most deadly natural disasters of the past few years. Likewise, a political conflict on the other side of the planet can lead to war, which means that a member of your family may be called up to active duty and sent into harm's way more than 7,000 miles from your home. Each member of the family may experience individual stress, have trouble concentrating, and feel ill with worry. The entire globe has become an interdependent social unit. If we are to prosper and thrive in the twenty-first century, we need to understand connections that go beyond our local communities.

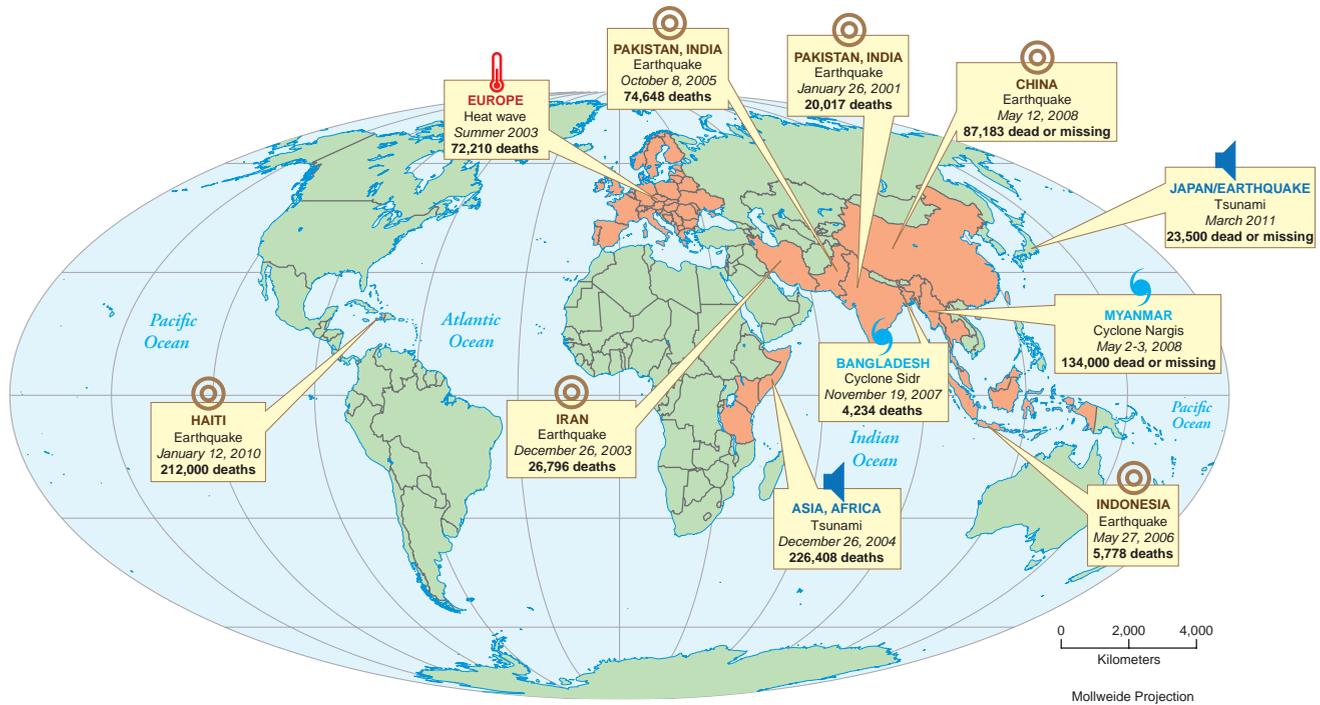
Even patterns such as domestic violence, considered as micro- and meso-level issues above, can be examined at the macro level. A study of 95 societies around the world

found that violence against women (especially rape) occurs at very different rates in different societies, with some societies being completely free of rape (Benderly 1982) and others having a “culture of rape.” The most consistent predictor of violence against women was a macho conception of masculine roles and personality. Societies that did not define masculinity in terms of dominance and control were virtually free of rape. Some sociologists believe that the same pattern holds for domestic violence: A society or subgroup within society that teaches males that the finest expression of their masculinity is physical strength and domination is very likely to have battered women (Burn 2005). The point is that understanding individual human behavior often requires investigation of larger societal beliefs that support that behavior. Worldwide patterns may tell us something about a social problem and offer new lenses for understanding variables that contribute to a problem. Try the “Engaging Sociology” activity on page 24 to test your understanding of levels of analysis and the sociological imagination.

## Thinking Sociologically

What factors influenced you to take this sociology class? Micro-level factors might include your advisor, your schedule, and a previous interest in sociology. At the meso and macro levels, what other factors influenced you?

Distinctions between each level of analysis are not sharply delineated. The micro level shades into the meso level, and the lines between the meso level and the macro level are blurry. Still, it is clear that in some micro-level social units, you know everyone, or at least every member of the social unit is only two degrees of relatedness away. Every person in the social unit knows someone whom you also know. We also all participate in meso-level social units that are smaller than the nation but can be huge. Millions of people may belong to the same religious denomination or the same political party. We have connections with those people, and our lives are affected by people we do not even know. Consider political activities in the United States and other countries that take place on the Internet. In political campaigns, millions of individuals join organizations such as MoveOn.org and TrueMajority, participate in dialogues online, and contribute money to political organizations. People living thousands of miles from one another united financially and in spirit to support Obama-Biden or McCain-Palin in the 2008 U.S. election. Thus, the meso level is different from the micro level, but both influence us. The macro



**Map 1.1** The Deadliest Natural Disasters From January 2001 to June 2011  
 Source: Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters 2011. Map by Anna Versluis.

level is even more removed from the individual, but its impact can change our lives.

The social world model presented in the chapter opening illustrates the interplay of micro-, meso-, and macro-level forces, and Figure 1.2 illustrates that this micro-to-macro model should be seen as a continuum. In “Sociology Around the World” on page 25 we examine a village in Tunisia to see how macro-level forces influence a meso-level local community and individual micro-level lives.

### Thinking Sociologically

Place the groups to which you belong in a hierarchy from micro to meso to macro levels. Note how each social unit and its subunits exist within a larger unit until you reach the level of the entire global community.

Micro social units      Meso social units      Macro social units

**Figure 1.2** The Micro-to-Macro Continuum

## Engaging Sociology

### Micro-Meso-Macro

Look at the list of various groups and other social units below. Identify which group would belong in each level—(1) micro, (2) meso, or (3) macro. The definitions should help you make your decisions, but keep in mind that not all social units fall clearly into one level. Answers are found online at [www.sagepub.com/oswcondensed2e](http://www.sagepub.com/oswcondensed2e).

**Micro-level groups:** Small, local community social units in which everyone knows everyone or knows someone whom you also know.

**Meso-level groups:** Social units of intermediate size, usually large enough that many members may never have heard the names of many other members and may have little access to the leaders, yet not so large as to seem distant or the leaders unapproachable. If you do not know the leaders yourself, you probably know someone who is friends with them.

**Macro-level groups:** Large social units, usually quite bureaucratic, which operate at a national or a global level. Most members are unlikely to know or have communicated with the leaders personally or know someone who knows them. The “business” of these groups is of international import and implication. Some research indicates that every person on the planet is within seven degrees of relatedness to every other human being. A macro-level system is one in which *most* of the members are within at least five degrees of relatedness to each other—that is, you know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows the person in question.

#### 1. Micro social units

- \_\_\_\_\_ Your nuclear family
- \_\_\_\_\_ The United Nations
- \_\_\_\_\_ A local chapter of the Lions Club or the Rotary Club
- \_\_\_\_\_ Your high school baseball team
- \_\_\_\_\_ India
- \_\_\_\_\_ NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)
- \_\_\_\_\_ The First Baptist Church in Muncie, Indiana
- \_\_\_\_\_ World Bank
- \_\_\_\_\_ A family reunion
- \_\_\_\_\_ Google, Inc. (international)
- \_\_\_\_\_ The Department of Education for the Commonwealth of Kentucky
- \_\_\_\_\_ The show choir in your local high school
- \_\_\_\_\_ African Canadians

#### 2. Meso social units

- \_\_\_\_\_ The Dineh (Navajo) people
- \_\_\_\_\_ Canada
- \_\_\_\_\_ The Republican Party in the United States
- \_\_\_\_\_ The World Court
- \_\_\_\_\_ A fraternity at your college
- \_\_\_\_\_ International Monetary Fund (IMF)
- \_\_\_\_\_ The Ministry of Education for Spain
- \_\_\_\_\_ The Roman Catholic Church (with its headquarters at the Vatican in Rome)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Australia
- \_\_\_\_\_ The Chi Omega National Sorority
- \_\_\_\_\_ Boy Scout Troop #3 in Marion, Ohio
- \_\_\_\_\_ Al-Qaeda (an international alliance of terrorist organizations)
- \_\_\_\_\_ The provincial government for the Canadian province of Ontario
- \_\_\_\_\_ The United States of America

#### 3. Macro social units

Most of these fall into clear categories, but some are “on the line,” and one could legitimately place them in more than one group. See how your authors rate these at [www.sagepub.com/oswcondensed2e](http://www.sagepub.com/oswcondensed2e). There is a second exercise online that asks you to apply these categories to identify some connections.



## Sociology Around the World

### Tunisian Village Meets the Modern World

This is a story of change as macro-level innovations enter a small traditional village. It illustrates how the social units of the social world model and the three levels of analysis enter into sociological analysis. As you read, try to identify both the units and levels of analysis being discussed and the impact of globalization on a community that cannot know what these changes will bring.

The workday began at dawn as usual in the small fishing village on the coast of Tunisia, North Africa. Men prepared their nets and boats for the day, while women prepared breakfast and dressed the young children for school. About 10 A.M., it began—the event that would change this picturesque village forever. Bulldozers arrived first, followed by trench diggers and cement mixers, to begin their overhaul of the village.

Villagers had suspected something was afoot when important-looking officials arrived two months earlier with foreign businessmen, followed by two teams of surveyors. Without their approval, the government had sold land that the village had held communally for generations to the foreigners so they could build a multimillion-dollar hotel and casino. When concerned citizens asked what was happening in their village, they were assured that their way of life would not change. The contractor from the capital city of Tunis said they would still have access to the beach and ocean for fishing. He also promised them many benefits from the hotel project—jobs, help from the government to improve roads and housing, and a higher standard of living.

The contractor had set up camp in a trailer on the beach, and word soon got around that he would be hiring some men for higher hourly wages than they could make in a day or even month of fishing. Rivalries soon developed between friends over who should apply for the limited number of jobs.

As the bulldozers moved in, residents had mixed opinions about the changes taking place in their village and their lives. Some saw the changes as exciting opportunities for new jobs and recognition of their

beautiful village; others viewed the changes as destroying a lifestyle that was all they and generations before them had known.

Today, the village is dwarfed by the huge hotel, and the locals are looked on as quaint curiosities by the European tourists. Fishing has become a secondary source of employment to working in the hotel and casino or selling local crafts and trinkets to souvenir-seeking visitors. Many women are now employed outside the home by the hotel, creating new family structures as grandparents, unemployed men, and other relations take over child-rearing responsibilities.

To understand the changes in this one small village and other communities facing similar change, a sociologist uses the sociological imagination. This involves understanding the global, political, and economic trends that are affecting this village and its inhabitants (macro-level analysis). It requires comprehension of transformation of social institutions within the nation (meso-level analysis). Finally, sociological investigation explores how change impacts the individual Tunisian villagers (micro-level analysis).

To sociologically analyze the process of change, it is important to understand what is going on in this situation. The government officials and the international business representatives negotiated a lucrative deal to benefit both Tunisia and the business corporation. The community and its powerless residents presented few obstacles to the project from the point of view of the government, and in fact, government officials reasoned that villagers could benefit from new jobs. However, economic and family roles of the villagers—how they earned a living and how they raised their children—changed dramatically with the disruption to their traditional ways. The process of change began with the demand of people far from Tunisia for vacation spots in the sun. Ultimately, this process reached the village's local environment, profoundly affecting the village and everyone in it. For this Tunisian village, the old ways are gone forever.

## The Social World Model and This Book

Throughout this book, the social world model will be used as the framework for understanding the social units, social processes, and surrounding environment. Each social unit and process is taken out, examined, and returned to its place in the interconnected social world model so that you can comprehend the whole social world and its parts, like putting a puzzle together. Look for the model at the beginning of every chapter. You can also expect the micro-, meso-, and macro-level dimensions of issues to be explored throughout the text.

The social world engulfs each of us from the moment of our birth until we die. Throughout our lives, each of us is part of a set of social relationships that provide guidelines for how we interact with others and how we see ourselves. This does not mean that human behavior is strictly determined by our links to the social world. Humans are more than mere puppets whose behavior is programmed by social structure. It does mean, however, that influence between the individual and the larger social world is reciprocal. We are influenced by and we have influence on our social environment. The social world is a human creation, and we can and

do change that which we create. It acts on us, and we act on it. In this sense, social units are not static but are constantly emerging and changing in the course of human interaction.

The difficulty for most of us is that we are so caught up in our daily concerns that we fail to see and understand the social forces that are at work in our personal environments. What we need are the conceptual and methodological tools to help us gain a more complete and accurate perspective on the social world. The concepts, theories, methods, and levels of analysis employed by sociologists are the very tools that will help give us that perspective. To use an analogy, each different lens of a camera gives the photographer a unique view of the world. Wide-angle lenses, close-up lenses, telephoto lenses, and special filters each serve a purpose in creating a distinctive picture or frame of the world. No one lens will provide the complete picture. Yet, the combination of images produced by various lenses allows us to examine in detail aspects of the world we might ordinarily overlook. That is what the sociological perspective gives us: a unique set of tools to see the social world with more penetrating clarity. In seeing the social world from a sociological perspective, we are better able to use that knowledge constructively, and we are better able to understand who we are as social beings. Practice the levels of analysis in the following “Engaging Sociology.”



*Building and staffing of this resort in Tunisia—which is patronized by affluent people from other continents (global)—changed the economy, the culture, the social structure (meso level), and individual lives (micro level) in the local community.*

## Engaging Sociology

### Micro-Meso-Macro: An Application Exercise

Imagine that there has been a major economic downturn (recession) in your local community. Identify four possible events at each level (micro, meso, and macro) that could contribute to the economic troubles in your town.

The micro (local community) level:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

The meso (intermediate—state, organizational, or ethnic subculture) level:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

The macro (national/global) level:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

The next issue, then, is how we gather data that inform how we understand and influence the social world. When we say we know something about society, how is it

that we know? What is considered evidence in sociology, and what lens (theory) do we use to interpret the data? These are the central issues of the next chapter.



## What Have We Learned?

We live in a complex social world with many layers of interaction. If we really want to understand our own lives, we need to comprehend the various levels of analysis that affect our lives and the dynamic connections between those levels. Moreover, as citizens of democracies, we need to understand how to influence our social environments, from city councils, school boards, and state legislatures to congressional, presidential, and other organizations with major policy makers. To do so wisely, we need both objective lenses for viewing this complex social world and accurate, valid information (facts) about the society. As the science of society, sociology can provide both tested empirical data and a broad, analytical perspective.

### Key Points:

- Humans are, at their very core, social animals—more akin to pack or herd animals than to individualistic cats. (See pp. 5–7.)
- A core concept in sociology is the sociological imagination. It requires that we see how our individual lives and personal troubles are shaped by historical and structural events outside of our everyday lives. It also prods us to see how we can influence our society. (See pp. 9–10.)
- Sociology is a social science and, therefore, uses the tools of the sciences to establish credible evidence to understand our social world. As a science, sociology is scientific and objective rather than value laden. (See pp. 10–13.)
- Sociology has pragmatic applications, including those that are essential for the job market. (See pp. 13–17.)
- Sociology focuses on social units or groups, on social structures such as institutions, on social processes that give a social unit its dynamic character, and on their environments. (See pp. 17–20.)
- The social world model is the organizing theme of this book. Using the sociological imagination, we can understand our social world best by clarifying the interconnections between micro, meso, and macro levels of the social system. Each chapter of this book will examine society at these three levels of analysis. (See pp. 20–27.)

## Contributing to Our Social World: What Can We Do?

At the end of this and all subsequent chapters, you will find suggestions for work, service learning, internships, and volunteering that encourage you to apply the concepts, principles, and ideas discussed in the chapter in practical contexts.

### At the Local Level:

- *Sociology departments' student organizations or clubs.* You can meet other students interested in sociology, get to know faculty members, and attend presentations by guest speakers. Visit a meeting and consider joining whether you are a sociology major or not. If no such organization exists, consider forming one with the help of a faculty member.
- *Undergraduate honors society, Alpha Kappa Delta (AKD).* Visit the AKD website at <http://sites.google.com/site/alphakappadeltainternational> and learn more about it and what it takes to join or form a chapter.
- *Volunteer opportunities.* This sociology course will give you ideas of many volunteer opportunities in which you may want to become involved. This is rewarding and good experience for future jobs.

### At the Regional and National Levels:

- *The American Sociological Association (ASA)* is the leading professional organization of sociologists in the United States. It has several programs and initiatives of special interest to students. Visit the ASA website at [www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org) and click on the "Teaching & Learning/Students: Undergraduate" link at the top of the page. Read the items and follow the links to additional material on the advantages of studying sociology. Most sociologists also participate in a major state or regional association. These groups are especially student friendly and feature publications and sessions at their annual meetings specifically for undergraduates. The organizations and website addresses are listed by the ASA, with direct links to their home pages at <http://www2.asanet.org/governance/aligned.html>.

Visit [www.sagepub.com/oswcondensed2e](http://www.sagepub.com/oswcondensed2e) for online activities, sample tests, and other helpful information. Select "Chapter 1: Sociology" for chapter-specific activities.