In **Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life, Eleventh Edition**, David M. Newman continues to show students how to see the "unfamiliar in the familiar"—to step back and see organization and predictability in their taken-for-granted personal experiences. With his approachable writing style and lively personal anecdotes, the author's goal since the first edition has been the same: to write a textbook that "reads like a real book." Newman uses the metaphors of "architecture" and "construction" to help students understand that society is not something that exists "out there," independently of them; it is a human creation that is planned, formed, maintained, or altered by individuals.

New to This Edition

- New and redesigned visual essays are briefer, more directly linked to chapter content, and include questions for writing or discussion.
- The interior has been redesigned and a second color added to enhance tables and figures.
- All statistical information and exhibits have been updated, including the addition of new exhibits.
- Many examples have been updated to reflect current events.

Key Features

- Personal vignettes engage students and show them how sociology affects everyday life.
- Research features expose students to the importance and application of social science research.
- Micro-macro features demonstrate how individual experiences connect to broader cultural, institutional, and structural phenomena.
- For students considering medical careers and planning for the MCAT exam, the book contains many substantive examples from medicine and health care.

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ISBN 978-1-5063-0544-8

Cover image: Thinkstock.com

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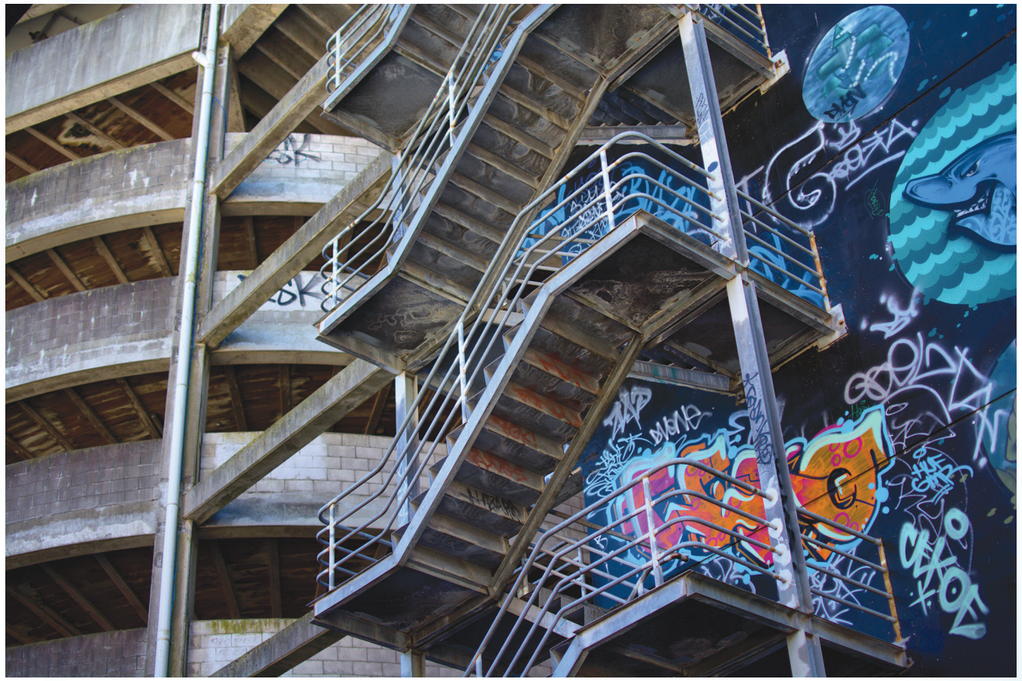
exploring the architecture of everyday life



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david m. newman

Sociology

Eleventh Edition

SAGE was founded in 1965 by Sara Miller McCune to support the dissemination of usable knowledge by publishing innovative and high-quality research and teaching content. Today, we publish over 900 journals, including those of more than 400 learned societies, more than 800 new books per year, and a growing range of library products including archives, data, case studies, reports, and video. SAGE remains majority-owned by our founder, and after Sara's lifetime will become owned by a charitable trust that secures our continued independence.

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Sociology

Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life

Eleventh Edition

David M. Newman
DePauw University

SAGE

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
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FOR INFORMATION:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
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SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
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Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Newman, David M., 1958-

Title: Sociology : exploring the architecture of everyday life / David M. Newman, DePauw University.

Description: Eleventh Edition. | Thousand Oaks : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016. | Revised edition of the author's Sociology, 2014. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015039530 | ISBN 9781506305448 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Sociology.
Classification: LCC HM585 .N48 2016 | DDC 301—dc23 LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015039530

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Acquisitions Editor: Jeff Lasser
Associate Editor: Nathan Davidson
eLearning Editor: Gabrielle Piccininni
Editorial Assistant: Alexandra Croell
Production Editor: Laura Barrett
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Kris Bergstad
Indexer: Diggs Publication Services
Cover Designer: Candice Harman
Marketing Manager: Johanna Swenson

16 17 18 19 20 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

It was the first day of the fall semester in 1994. I had just finished making the final adjustments to the very first edition of this book, which was due to be published the following January. I felt pretty good about myself, like I'd just accomplished something monumental. Even my two sons were impressed with me (although not as impressed as the time we went to a professional hockey game and I leaped out of my seat to catch an errant, speeding puck barehanded). I walked into the first meeting of my Contemporary Society class eager to start teaching wide-eyed, first-year students a thing or two about sociology.

In my introductory comments to the class that day, I mentioned that I had just written this book. The panicked look in their eyes—a curious combination of awe and fear—calmed when I told them I wouldn't be requiring them to read it that semester. I told them that the process of writing an introductory text helped me immensely in preparing for the course and that I looked forward to passing on to them the knowledge I had accumulated.

The next day after class, one of the students—a bright, freshly scrubbed 18-year-old—approached me. The ensuing conversation would leave a humbling impression even two decades later:

Student: Hi. Umm. Professor Newman . . . I called my parents last night to, like, tell them how my first day in college went. I think they were, like, more nervous than I was. You know how parents can be.

Me: Yes, I sure do. I'm a parent myself, you know.

Student: Yeah, whatever. Anyway, I was telling them about my classes and my professors and stuff. I told them about this class and how I thought it would be pretty cool. I told them you had written a book. I thought that would impress them, you know, make it seem like they were getting their money's worth and everything.

Me: Well, thanks.

Student: So, they go, "What's the book about?" [He laughs sheepishly.] I told them I really didn't know, but I'd find out. So, like, that's what I'm doing . . . finding out.

Me: Well, I'm glad you asked. You see, it's an introductory sociology textbook that uses everyday experiences and phenomena as a way of understanding important sociological theories and ideas. In it I've attempted to . . .

Student: [His eyes, glazed over with boredom, suddenly jump back to life.] Wait, did you say it was a textbook?

Me: Why, yes. You see, the purpose of the book is to provide the reader with a thorough and useful introduction to the sociological perspective. I want to convey . . .

Student: [Quite embarrassed now] Oh . . . Professor Newman, I'm really sorry. I misunderstood you. I thought you had written a real book.

Real book. *Real* book. *Real* book. Those words rang in my head like some relentless church bell. At first, I tried to dismiss the comment as the remark of a naïve kid who didn't know any better. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized what his comment reflected. The perception that textbooks aren't *real* books is widespread.

A few years ago, I heard a radio ad for a local Red Cross book drive. The narrator asked listeners to donate any unused or unwanted books *as long as they weren't textbooks*. Yep, that's what he said. Torn copies of *The Cat in the Hat*? Fine, they'll take 'em. Grease-stained owner's manuals for 1976 Ford Pintos? Sure, glad to have 'em. Textbooks? No way!

Sadly, these sorts of perceptions are not altogether unwarranted. Textbooks hover on the margins of the literary world, somewhere between respectable, intellectual monographs on trailblazing research and Harlequin romance novels. Traditionally, they've been less than titillating: thick, heavy, expensive, and easily discarded for a measly five bucks at the end-of-semester "book buy-back."

My goal—from that very first edition to this one—has always been to write a textbook that reads like a *real* book. In the first ten editions, I tried to capture simultaneously the essence and insight of my discipline and the reader's interest. From what reviewers, instructors, and students who've read and used the book over the years have said, I think I've been fairly successful. While no Hollywood movie studio has expressed interest in turning this book into a movie (yet!), people do seem to like the relaxed tone and appreciate the consistent theme that ties all the chapters together. Many instructors have commented on how the book enables students to truly understand the unique and useful elements of a sociological perspective. Take that, Red Cross!

FEATURES OF THE 11TH EDITION

To my sons—who believe that I have nothing important to say about anything anyway—continually revising this book has always been clear evidence of my incompetence. Back when he was in middle school, my younger son once asked me, "Why do you keep writing the same book over and over? My English teacher made me rewrite a book report on *To Kill a Mockingbird* because I answered some questions wrong. Is that what's going on here, Dad? Is your publisher making you write the book again because there's too much wrong stuff in it?" I told him no and that I'd make him read the whole book—cover to cover—if he continued to ask such questions. He stopped . . . although to this day, he's still not convinced I have anything useful to say.

Despite his concerns, sociology textbooks do need to be revised regularly and frequently. No book can be of lasting value if it remains static, locked into a particular style and content. I keep my ears and eyes open, always looking for some new example or current issue to include in the book. My office overflows with stacks of books, newspaper clippings, photocopied journal articles, Post-it notes, and shreds of paper napkins containing scribbled ideas that I write to myself at the breakfast table when I come across something interesting. I've been known to send myself e-mails at 3:00 in the morning so as not to forget the great idea that came to me in the haziness between sleep and wakefulness.

One thing I've learned over the years is that when revising a book, it's a lot easier to add new material than it is to cut out the old stuff. But simply inserting bits and pieces here and there tends to make books fat and unwieldy. So I've tried to streamline the book wherever possible. I've replaced outdated material with new material where appropriate, revised all the statistical information, condensed or deleted some sections, and changed the order of others.

Here are some of the specific changes I've made in this 11th edition to enhance the features that worked so well in the previous editions.

Updated Examples and Statistical Information

As in the first ten editions, each chapter is peppered with anecdotes, personal observations, and accounts of contemporary events that serve as illustrations of the sociological points I'm making.

Many of the examples you will read are taken from today's news headlines; others come from incidents in my own life.

It would be impossible to write an introduction to the discipline of sociology without accounting for the life-altering occurrences—wars, natural disasters, school shootings, political upheavals, court decisions, economic meltdowns, Donald Trump's latest escapades—that we hear about every day. So throughout this book, I've made a special effort to provide some sociological insight into well-known contemporary events and trends, both large and small. In doing so, I intend to show you the pervasiveness and applicability of sociology in our ordinary, everyday experiences in a way that, I hope, rings familiar with you.

As you will see throughout the book, it is impossible to understand what happens to us in our personal lives without taking into consideration broader social and historical phenomena. Several specific recent developments have had—and will continue to have—a dramatic impact on sociological thought and on people's everyday lives: the lingering effects of the recent global economic recession, a stream of fatal encounters between police and unarmed people of color, the legalization of same-sex marriage, and the dramatic growth of communication technology, particularly social networking sites. When the economy suffers (or improves), everyone—from tycoons to unemployed welfare recipients—experiences some kind of alteration in her or his day-to-day routine. As I was writing this edition, it was quite a challenge to keep up with the most current information on joblessness, hiring trends, home foreclosures, spending patterns, and so on. Likewise, each new incident of racially- or ethically connected violence—whether at the hands of law enforcement, hate groups, or lone assailants—alters the trajectory of race relations in this country. Major political events too (like a Supreme Court ruling) can change what we know and what we take for granted about the most fundamental components of our lives—like who can marry whom. And how can we analyze the sociology of everyday life without acknowledging the powerful role online social networking has had in shaping the way we learn, relate to others, and ultimately define ourselves? Thus, you will see references to these—and many other—developments throughout the book to illustrate the interconnections between private life and massive historical occurrences.

I also want to call to your attention the fact that many extended examples of sociological theories and concepts throughout the book focus on some aspect of health, illness, and medicine. I have done this for two reasons. First of all, no matter who we are or where we come from, all of us must deal with health matters from time to time. Our own physical and mental well-being is perhaps the most personal and immediate thing in our lives. At the same time, whenever we seek medical attention—whether in a doctor's office, a local pharmacy, or a hospital—or try to figure out how to pay for it, we enter a massive health care system that can sometimes feel immensely bureaucratic and *im*personal. And as medical costs continue to rise, changes to our health care system—both proposed and enacted—will dominate economic forecasts, newspaper headlines, and legislative action for years to come. Second, students taking the Medical College Admissions Test now must take a course in sociology. And so these health care-related examples will provide such students with applications and illustrations that are directly relevant to their needs and, hopefully, make them better doctors in the future.

I've also tried to provide the most current statistical information possible. I've updated all the graphic exhibits and, in the process, changed some of them from statistical tables to more readable charts and graphs, making trends and relationships more obvious. Much of the new statistical information is drawn from the most recent data from sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the Population Reference Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Center for Education Statistics, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, and the Pew Research Center.

Updated "Sociologists at Work" and "Micro-Macro Connections"

In the first ten editions, I provided many in-depth features that focused either on a specific piece of sociological research or on some issue that illustrates the connection between the everyday lives of individuals and the structure of their society. These extended discussions link social institutions to personal experiences and provide insight into the methods sociologists use to gather information and draw conclusions about how our world works.

Instructors and students alike have found these features very useful in generating classroom discussion. The features that I've thoroughly updated from the previous edition focus on topics such as suicide, the language of war, family privacy, smartphones, children's toys, dual-earner households, clergy sexual abuse, the cultural impact of antidepressants, the global health divide, multiracial identity, residential segregation, dangerous media images, intergenerational conflict, and the shifting politics of immigration. In addition, I've also added a few new features on sleep, same-sex marriage, race and medical mistrust, gender and communication, and parental pressure in childhood sports.

New Articles in the Companion Reader

Jodi O'Brien, a sociologist at Seattle University, Michelle Robertson at St. Edwards University, and I have carefully edited a companion volume to this book consisting of short articles, chapters, and excerpts written by other authors. These readings are provocative and eye-opening examples of the joys and insights of sociological thinking. Many of them vividly show how sociologists gather evidence through carefully designed research. Others are personal narratives that provide firsthand accounts of how social forces influence people's lives. The readings examine common, everyday experiences; important social issues; global concerns; and distinct historical events that illustrate the relationship between the individual and society. We've taken great pains to include readings that show how race, social class, gender, and sexual orientation intersect to influence everyday experiences.

Of the 41 selections in this edition of the reader, 15 are new. The new selections touch on important and relevant sociological issues such as the rules of gift giving, the questionable use of statistics, consumerism, race and class in everyday public encounters, gay parenting, covenant marriage, the power of fads, the everyday experience of race on college campuses, gender and technology, cyberbrides, and community organizing. In addition, we've brought back a few popular readings from past editions and have moved several others to different chapters to improve their usefulness and applicability.

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A WORD ABOUT THE "ARCHITECTURE OF SOCIETY"

I have chosen the image of architecture in the subtitle to convey one of the driving themes of this book: Society is a human construction. Society is not "out there" somewhere, waiting to be visited and examined. It exists in the minute details of our day-to-day lives. Whenever we follow its rules or break them, enter its roles or shed them, work to change things or keep them as they are, we are adding another nail, plank, or frame to the structure of our society. In short, society—like the buildings around us—couldn't exist were it not for the actions of people.

At the same time, however, this structure that we have created appears to exist independently of us. We don't usually spend much time thinking about the buildings we live, work, and play in as human constructions. We see them as finished products, not as the processes that created them. Only when something goes wrong—the pipes leak or the walls crack—do we realize that people made these structures and people are the ones who must fix them. When buildings outlive their usefulness or become dangerous to their inhabitants, people must renovate them or, if necessary, tear them down.

Likewise, society is so massive and has been around for so long that it *appears* to stand on its own, at a level above and beyond the toiling hands of individual people. But here, too, when things begin to go wrong—widespread discrimination, environmental degradation, massive poverty, lack of affordable health care, escalating crime rates—people must do something about it.

So the fascinating paradox of human life is that we build society, collectively "forget" that we've built it, and live under its massive and influential structure. But we are not stuck with society as it

is. Human beings are the architects of their own social reality. Throughout this book, I examine the active roles individuals play in planning, maintaining, or fixing society.

A FINAL THOUGHT

One of the greatest challenges I have faced in three decades teaching sociology is trying to get my students to see the personal relevance of the course material, to fully appreciate the connection between the individual and society. The true value of sociology lies in its unique ability to show the two-way connection between the most private elements of our lives—our characteristics, experiences, behaviors, and thoughts—and the cultures, groups, organizations, and social institutions to which we belong. The "everyday life" approach in this book uses real-world examples and personal observations as a vehicle for understanding the relationship between individuals and society.

My purpose is to make the familiar unfamiliar—to help you critically examine the commonplace and the ordinary in your own life. Only when you step back and examine the taken-for-granted aspects of your personal experiences can you see that there is an inherent, sometimes unrecognized organization and predictability to them. At the same time, you will see that the structure of society is greater than the sum of the experiences and psychologies of the individuals in it.

It is my conviction that this intellectual excursion should be a thought-provoking and enjoyable one. Reading a textbook doesn't have to be boring or, even worse, the academic equivalent of a painful trip to the dentist (although I personally have nothing against dentists). I believe that one of my responsibilities as a teacher is to provide my students with a challenging but comfortable classroom atmosphere in which to learn. I have tried to do the same in this book. Your instructor has chosen this book not because it makes his or her job teaching your course any easier but because he or she wants you, the student, to see how sociology helps us to understand how the small, private experiences of our everyday lives are connected to this thing we call society. I hope you learn to appreciate this important message, and I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Have fun,

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Acknowledgments

A book project such as this one takes an enormous amount of time to develop. Over the span of 11 editions, I've spent thousands of hours on this book—typing away at my computer, endlessly searching the Web, fretting over what I should and shouldn't include, proofreading for mistakes—either holed up in my isolated and very cluttered third-floor office or tucked away in the quiet corner of a library. Yet as solitary as this project was, I could not have done it alone. Over the years, many people have provided invaluable assistance to make this book a reality. Without their generous help and support, it wouldn't have been written, and you'd be reading some other sociologist's list of people to thank. Because I have revised rather than rewritten this book, I remain indebted to those who have helped me at some point during the writing of all 11 editions.

First, I would like to thank the former publisher and president of Pine Forge Press, Steve Rutter. More than two decades ago, when I was a brand new (and naïve) author, he pushed, prodded, and cajoled me into exceeding my expectations and overachieving. The numerous suggestions he offered on the early editions of this book made it a better one. Likewise, my former editor, Becky Smith, must be thanked for helping me through the maze of details and difficulties that cropped up during the many previous versions of this book. Even though she no longer edits my books, hers is the grammar-correcting, thesaurus-wielding voice in my head whenever I write.

As for this edition, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Jeff Lasser, Laura Barrett, and Nathan Davidson at SAGE for their insight and guidance in putting together this newest edition. Having already written ten editions of this book, I was definitely an old dog with absolutely no desire to learn any new tricks when these individuals became involved. To their credit, they let me write as I have always written. For their trust, I am eternally grateful.

I would also like to express my thanks to Harvest Moon of the University of Texas at Arlington for creating the student study site materials and instructor teaching resources.

As always, I appreciate the many helpful comments offered by the reviewers of the 10 editions of this book:

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Cynthia A. Woolever, Hartford Seminary

Don C. Yost, Mountain State University

Ashraf Zahedi, Stanford University

Stephen Zehr, University of Southern Indiana

I also want to express my appreciation to the many colleagues, students, and friends who have offered cherished assistance throughout the production of all eleven editions of this book and have put up with my incessant whining about how hard it all was. Some offered bits of advice on specific topics; others provided general support and encouragement, which helped me retain my sanity. Jodi O'Brien, after close to 30 years of friendship and more than a decade of coediting, continues to graciously remind me that there's more to life than writing a book. And I'd also like to acknowledge the library staffs at my school, DePauw University, and at Bates College in Maine, where I spend many hours over the summers putting the final touches on this book.

I'm pleased to express deep gratitude to my sons, Zach and Seth, and to my students, who, throughout the years, have kept me curious and prevented me from taking myself too seriously. And finally, my deepest thanks must go to Rebecca Upton, whose love, eternal optimism, kind support, and unwavering confidence consistently inspire me to push beyond my intellectual limitations, and to C. Mokolodi Underfoot, whose crooked grin and wagging tail never fail to brighten my day.

About the Author

David M. Newman earned his B.A. from San Diego State University in 1981 and his graduate degrees from the University of Washington in Seattle (M.A. 1984, PhD 1988). After a year at the University of Connecticut, David came to DePauw University in 1989 and has been there ever since. David teaches courses in Contemporary Society, Deviance, Mental Illness, Family, Social Psychology, and Research Methods. He has published numerous articles on teaching and has presented research papers on the intersection of gender and power in intimate relationships. Recently most of his scholarly activity has been devoted to writing and revising several books, including *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life* (Sage, 2013); *Identities and Inequalities: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (McGraw-Hill, 2012); and *Families: A Sociological Perspective* (McGraw-Hill, 2009). His current work examines the cultural meaning, institutional importance, and social limitations of "second chance" and "permanent stigma" narratives in everyday life.

PART

I

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

What is the relationship between your private life and the social world around you? Part I introduces you to the guiding theme of this book: Our personal, everyday experiences affect and are affected by the larger society in which we live. In Chapters 1 and 2 I discuss the sociological perspective on human life and the ways in which it differs from the more individualistic approaches of psychology and biology. You will read about what society consists of and get a glimpse into sociologists' attempts to understand the two-way relationship between the individual and society.

As you read on, keep in mind a metaphor that will be used throughout the book to help explain the nature of society: architecture. Like buildings, societies have a design discernible to the alert eye. Both are constructed by bringing together a wide variety of materials in a complex process. Both, through their structure, shape the activities within. At the same time, both change. Sometimes they change subtly and gradually as the inhabitants go about their lives; other times they are deliberately redecorated or remodeled. As you make your way through this book, see if you can discover more ways in which buildings and societies are alike.

CHAPTER

1

Taking a New Look at a Familiar World

André graduated from college in 2014. He had been a model student. When not studying, he found time to help kids read at the local elementary school and actively participated in student government at his own school. He got along well with his professors, his grades were excellent, he made the dean's list all 4 years, and he graduated Phi Beta Kappa. As a computer science major with a minor in economics, André thought his future was set: He would land a job at a top software company or perhaps a stock brokerage firm and work his way up the ladder so that he'd be earning a six-figure income by the time he was 30.

But when André entered the job market and began applying for jobs, things didn't go exactly according to plan. Despite his credentials, nobody seemed willing to hire him full time. He was able to survive only by taking temporary freelance programming jobs here and there and working nights at the Gap. Although most of his classmates had similar difficulties finding jobs, André began to question his own abilities: "Do I lack the skills employers are looking for? Am I not trying hard enough? What the heck is wrong with me?" His friends and family were as encouraging as they could be, but some secretly wondered if André wasn't as smart as they'd thought he was.

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

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

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

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

In both of these stories, notice how people immediately try to explain an unhappy situation by focusing on the personal characteristics and attributes of the individuals involved. André blames himself for not being able to land a job in his field; others harbor doubts about his intelligence and drive. Michael wonders what he did to sour his relationship with Louise; his friends question Louise's psychological stability. Such reactions are not uncommon. We have a marked tendency to rely on ***individualistic explanations***, attributing people's achievements and disappointments to their personal qualities.

Why can't André, our highly intelligent, well-trained, talented college graduate, land a permanent job in his field? It's certainly possible that he has some personal flaw that makes him unemployable: lack of motivation, laziness, negative attitude, bad hygiene, and so on. Or maybe he doesn't come across as particularly capable during job interviews.

But by focusing exclusively on such individual "deficiencies," we risk overlooking the broader societal factors that may have affected André's job prospects. For instance, the employment situation for college graduates like André was part of a broader economic trend that began with the global financial crisis of 2008 and continues to suppress the job market today. At the time I was writing this chapter, 5.3% of American adults (about 8.3 million people) were officially unemployed. Incidentally, the official unemployment rate only counts people who have been actively seeking employment for the past month. Thus it doesn't include the 6.5 million people who were employed part time even though they wanted to work full time, the 1.9 million "marginally attached" unemployed people who had looked for a job sometime in the past year (just not in the past month), and the 653,000 so-called "discouraged" workers who had lost hope and given up looking for employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015b). So you see, a lot of people are in André's boat.

But he's got a college education. That should help, right? It turns out that college degrees are no longer the guarantee of fruitful employment they once were. In the 4 years before the recession, employers increased their hiring of college graduates every year by an average of 13% over the previous year (cited in Hunsinger, 2009). In fact, the job market became so good in the mid 2000s that newspapers provided advice to college graduates on how to be "picky" when choosing a place to work (Knight, 2006). As late as May 2008, economists were still predicting a favorable job market for new graduates (K. Murphy, 2008).

But all that quickly changed after the recession. In 2007, 15% of recent college graduates were either unemployed or underemployed (that is, working in jobs that didn't require a college degree); by 2014 that figure increased to over 25% (Shierholz, Davis, & Kimball, 2014). Indeed, about 1 out of every 6 long-term unemployed people is a college graduate, up from less than 1 in 10 in 1979 (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2007; Mitchell, 2013).

Although new graduates do fare better than other young people without college degrees (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2013), their future outlook is tepid at best. According to the Collegiate Employment Research Institute (2014), only about 25% of employers reported definite plans to hire college graduates in the 2014 to 2015 academic year, and 42% of those employers who will be hiring intend to take on fewer people than they did the previous year. Not surprisingly, 82% of young adults in a poll a few years back said that finding a job is harder for them than it was in their parents' generation (Pew Research Center, 2012c).

What about earnings? College graduates earn 98% more per hour on average, than people without a degree (cited in Leonhardt, 2014). And having a degree brings higher pay even in fields that don't require a degree, such as dishwasher, hairdresser, and cashier (cited in Leonhardt, 2011). However, the average starting salary for college graduates has stagnated in recent years. For instance, since 2000, the wages of young college graduates has dropped by 7.7% and it's projected that this downward

trend will continue for the next 10 to 15 years (Shierholz, Davis, & Kimball, 2014). To make money matters worse, students who took out loans to pay for their college education have an average debt of about $28,400 after graduation (The Project on Student Debt, 2014).

So you see, André's employability and his chances of earning a good living were as much a result of the economic forces operating at the time he began looking for a job as of any of his personal qualifications. Had he graduated only 5 years earlier—when the unemployment rate hovered around 10%—his job prospects would have been even worse. Had he graduated a few years later—when employment opportunities are projected to improve—his prospects would have been much brighter.

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

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

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

In addition, Louise's decision to leave could have been indirectly affected by the sheer number of potentially obtainable partners—a result of shifts in the birthrate 20 years or so earlier. Today, there are roughly 126 U.S. men between 25 and 34 who are single, divorced, or widowed for every 100 women in the same categories (K. Parker, Wang, & Rohal, 2014). For a single, heterosexual woman like Louise, such a surplus of college-age men increases the likelihood that she would eventually find a better alternative to Michael. Fifty years ago, however, when there were 180 single men for every 100 single women, her chances would have been even better. The number of available alternatives can also vary geographically. For instance, Michael's prospects would improve if he were living in Auburn, Maine, where there are 81 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women, but sink if he lived in Mansfield, Ohio, where there are 215 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women (Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends, 2014). In sum, Michael's interpersonal value, and therefore the stability of his relationship with Louise, may have suffered not because of anything he did but because of population forces over which he had little, if any, control.

Let's take this notion beyond Louise and Michael's immediate dating network. For instance, the very characteristics and features that people consider desirable (or undesirable) in the first place reflect the values of the larger culture in which they live. Fashions and tastes are constantly changing, making particular characteristics (e.g., hairstyle, physique, clothing), behaviors (smoking, drinking,

sharing feelings), or life choices (educational attainment, occupation, political affiliation) more or less attractive. And broad economic forces can affect intimate choices even further. In China, where there are about 41 million *more* unmarried young men than women (Tsai, 2012a), single women can be especially choosy when it comes to romantic partners, often requiring that suitors be employed and own their own homes before they'll even consider them for a date (Jacobs, 2011).

The moral of these two stories is simple: To understand experiences in our personal lives, we must move past individual traits and examine broader societal characteristics and trends. External features beyond our immediate awareness and control often exert as much influence on the circumstances of our day-to-day lives as our "internal" qualities. We can't begin to explain an individual's employability without examining current and past economic trends that affect the number of jobs available and the number of people who are looking for work. We can't begin to explain why relationships work or don't work without addressing the broader interpersonal network and culture in which they are embedded. By the same token, we can't begin to explain people's ordinary, everyday thoughts and actions without examining the social forces that influence them.

SOCIOLOGY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

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

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

But how free are these decisions? Think about all the times your actions have been dictated or at least influenced by social circumstances over which you had little control. Have you ever felt that because of your age or gender or race, certain opportunities were closed to you? Your ability to legally drive a car, drink alcohol, or vote, for instance, is determined by society's prevailing definition of age. When you're older, you may be forced into retirement despite your skills and desire to continue working. Gender profoundly affects your choices, too. Some occupations, such as bank executive and engineer, are still overwhelmingly male, whereas others, such as registered nurse and preschool teacher, are almost exclusively female. Likewise, the doctrines of your religion may limit your behavioral choices. For a devout Catholic, premarital sex or even divorce is unlikely. Each day during the holy month of Ramadan, a strict Muslim must abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. An Orthodox Jew would never dream of drinking milk and eating meat at the same meal. Even universal bodily needs can be influenced by our social context.

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION

A SOCIOLOGY OF SLEEP

Everybody sleeps. Indeed, at certain moments in our lives—when we're studying for finals, when we're sick, when we become new parents—sleep may be the most all-encompassing preoccupation we have. One of the major ailments of modern life is lack of sleep. According to one poll, nearly two thirds of Americans complain that they don't get enough sleep. In the United States alone, there are over 2,000 sleep clinics to treat people's sleep problems. "Fatigue management" is now a growing therapeutic field (cited in Kolbert, 2013).

Sleep is obviously experienced differently by different individuals. I'm sure you know people who say they can't function on less than 10 hours of sleep a night while others say they're wide-awake and perky on just four.

But sleep preferences are not just a matter on individual adaptation. Children, for example, typically require much more sleep than adults, especially in their first several years of life. Even here, though, individual needs can be overridden by broader social concerns. One of the key tasks of parenting is training children to fit their sleeping patterns into the parents' schedule. "My baby slept through the night last night!!" is a celebratory exclamation all new parents long to shout. But it's not always easy. What parent hasn't experienced the struggle of trying to get a combative toddler to sleep at night? But parent-child conflict over sleep never completely disappears. Try waking up a surly teenager on a school day morning sometime. Incidentally, the problem of dozy teenagers has become so bad that the American Academy of Pediatrics (2014) recently issued a policy statement recommending a later start of the school day in middle and high school so that teens can get enough sleep at night.

According to sociologist Simon Williams (2011), sleep is "a window onto the social world" (p. 27). How, when, where, how much, and with whom we sleep is always a product of social, cultural, and historical forces. All societies must organize the sleep of their members in some way. Think about when and where it's appropriate to sleep. At night? In the privacy of your own home? Of course. American adults are expected to go to sleep somewhere around 11:00 at night and wake up around 7:00 in the morning—what one anthropologist refers to as "consolidated sleeping" (Wolf-Meyer, 2012). Anything else—"sleeping during the day, sleeping in bursts, waking up in the middle of the night"—is considered unsound, even abnormal and perhaps subject to some kind of therapeutic intervention (Kolbert, 2013, p. 25).

At times, going without sleep can be worn as a boastful badge of honor or pride. "If you snooze, you lose," "I'll have time to sleep when I'm dead" and all that. But this clearly can be taken too far. "Drowsiness . . . is increasingly regarded as the new drunkenness: a culpable state, since, we are every bit as dangerous behind the wheel when we're drowsy as when we are drunk" (S. Williams, 2011 p. 27–28). Indeed, the U.S.

Department of Transportation estimates that "driving while drowsy" causes 40,000 injuries and over 1,500 deaths a year on U.S. roads (cited in Kolbert, 2013).

The "8 hours of sleep at night" ideal has not always characterized people's lives. Up until the mid-19th century, it was common for people to sleep in periods throughout the day. They may have gone to bed in the later afternoon or early evening, slept for several hours, woken up and engaged in a few hours of activity, then gone to bed for a "second sleep." In some societies, periods of daytime sleep are a common part of the culture. The *siesta* in some Mediterranean countries and the midday rest in some Asian societies are held as acceptable, even valued, practices.

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

Yet the boundary between work (wakefulness) and home (sleep) is not always so clear. In certain occupations that involve the operation of heavy machinery—like long-distance truckers, train conductors, and airplane pilots—tired workers pose obvious safety hazards. Hence they have mandatory down time policies and work hour limitations. But as the pace of life has sped up, even office-based, non-manual occupations are facing the problem of worker fatigue due to lack of sleep. It's estimated that drowsiness costs the U.S. economy hundreds of billions of dollars each year in higher stress and lost productivity (Baxter & Kroll-Smith, 2005). One third of respondents in one poll indicated that they'd fallen asleep at work in the previous month (National Sleep Foundation, 2008).

Some sociologists have argued that recent changes in the workplace—flexible schedules, telecommuting, home-based work—have begun to blur the time-honored boundaries between public and private, work and home, and given rise to shifting conceptions of sleep. In particular, they cite the greater acceptability of the workplace nap as evidence of changing attitudes toward sleep and wakefulness: "Once a taboo act engaged in by those who knew they were violating company rules, workplace napping is emerging, albeit unevenly, in American work culture as a tolerated, if not prescribed, behavior" (Baxter & Kroll-Smith, 2005, p. 34). More and more companies have come to the conclusion that restorative naps are a relatively cheap solution to the problem of excessive drowsiness. Many now provide nap rooms (or serenity rooms) for their employees, where they can find comfortable sofas, soothing lighting, and enforced bans on tablet and smartphone usage.

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

Then there's the matter of personal style—your choices in hairstyle, dress, music, and the like. Large-scale marketing strategies can actually create a demand for particular products or images. Would Iggy Azalea, Katie Perry, or Nicki Minaj have become so popular without a tightly managed and slickly packaged publicity program designed to appeal to adolescents and preadolescents? Your tastes, and therefore your choices as a consumer, are often influenced by decisions made in far-off corporate boardrooms.

National and international economic trends also affect your everyday life. You may lose your job or, like André, face a tight job market as a result of economic fluctuations brought about by increased global competition or a severe recession. Or, because of the rapid development of certain types of technology, the college degree that may be your ticket to a rewarding career today may not qualify you even for a low-paying, entry-level position 10 years from now. In one poll, 75% of young adults who dropped out of college cited the financial need to work full time as the principal reason why it would be hard for them to go back to school (Lewin, 2009). And if you finish your degree but don't get a good job right out of college, you may have to move back home—like 41 million people between the ages of 25 and 34 these days (ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2015)—and live there for years after you graduate, not because you can't face the idea of living apart from your beloved parents but because you can't earn enough money to support yourself.

Government and politics affect our personal lives, too. A political decision made at the local, regional, national, or even international level may result in the closing of a government agency you depend on, make the goods and services to which you have grown accustomed either more expensive or less available, or reduce the size of your paycheck after taxes are taken out. Workplace family-leave policies or medical insurance regulations established by the government may affect your decision whether and when to have a baby or to undergo the elective surgery you've been putting off. If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, the federal and state governments can determine whether or not you can be fired from your job simply because of your sexual orientation. In the United States, decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court can increase or limit your ability to control your fertility, sue an employer for discrimination, use your property however you please, carry a concealed weapon in public, legally marry, be entitled to subsidized health insurance, or keep the details of your life a private matter.

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

- In 2005, Hurricane Katrina killed thousands of people, rendered hundreds of thousands homeless and unemployed, contaminated local waterways, and decimated Gulf Coast industries such as tourism and steel, lumber, and oil production. Its economic effects were felt immediately in the rest of the country, where, for instance, gasoline prices skyrocketed. It also had a staggering impact on U.S. exports and on the travel industry—both nationally and internationally.
- In 2008, a stock market plunge in the United States instantly sent markets tumbling in Europe, South America, and Asia. The ensuing recession drove up unemployment rates in just about every industrialized nation around the world. To this day, some countries, like Greece and Portugal, are on the verge of bankruptcy.
- In 2011, a massive earthquake and deadly tsunami crippled many Japanese companies that manufacture car parts, resulting in a drop in automobile production in U.S. plants. That same year, violent protests in Arab countries like Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen sparked fears of reduced oil imports and drove U.S. gasoline prices up over $4.00 a gallon.

- In the fall of 2014, an outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in several West African countries grabbed the world's attention. At the time of this writing there were over 20,000 documented cases in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone and about 8,000 deaths. In the United States there have been 4 cases and 1 death (Centers for Disease Control, 2015a). But even though the risk of contracting this disease in the U.S. is exceedingly low, one-fifth of Americans worry about getting it (Gallup, 2014). Immediately following the outbreak in West Africa, the Department of Homeland Security implemented travel restrictions to these countries and imposed elevated screening for passengers arriving from them. Anxieties grew. A train station in Dallas was shut down when a passenger was reported to have vomited on the platform. A cruise ship was blocked from docking in Mexico because a passenger worked in the Texas hospital where an Ebola patient died. Schools were shut down when it was suspected that an employee might have been on the same plane as an Ebola patient. Experts feared that the entire international business travel industry could suffer huge financial losses (Sharkey, 2014).
- In January, 2015 after three masked gunmen killed 12 people and wounded 11 others in the offices of the French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo,* cities across the United States immediately heightened police security in popular public venues. In fact, terrorist attacks in foreign countries routinely result in travel restrictions and increased safety measures here.

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

THE INSIGHTS OF SOCIOLOGY

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

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

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

- A 14-year-old girl, fearing she is overweight, begins systematically starving herself in the hope of becoming more attractive.
- A 55-year-old stockbroker, unable to find work since his firm laid him off, sinks into a depression after losing his family and his home. He now lives on the streets.
- A 46-year-old professor kills herself after learning that her position at the university will be terminated the following year due to budget cuts.
- The student body president and valedictorian of the local high school cannot begin or end her day without several shots of whiskey.

What do these people have in common? Your first response might be that they all have terrible personal problems that have made their lives suck. If you saw them only for what they've become—an "anorexic," a "homeless person," a "suicide victim," or an "alcoholic"—you might think they have some kind of personality defect, genetic flaw, or mental problem that renders them incapable of coping with the demands of contemporary life. Maybe they simply lack the willpower to pick themselves up and move on. In short, your immediate tendency may be to focus on the unique, perhaps "abnormal," characteristics of these people to explain their problems.

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

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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

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

Getting fired, for example, is a terrible, even traumatic private experience. Feelings of personal failure are inevitable when one loses a job. But if the unemployment rate in a community hovers around 23%—as it does in places hardest hit by the recent economic recession, like El Centro, California, and Yuma, Arizona (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014b)—then we must see unemployment not as a personal malfunction but as a social problem that has its roots in the economic and political structures of society. Listen to how one columnist described his job loss:

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

Such an easygoing response to being fired is probably uncommon. Nevertheless, his point is important sociologically: Being unemployed is not a character flaw or personal failure if a significant number of people in one's community are also unemployed. We can't explain a spike in the unemployment rate as a sudden increase in the number of incompetent or unprepared individual workers in the labor force. As long as the economy is arranged so that employees are easily replaced or slumps inevitably occur, the social problem of unemployment cannot be solved at the personal level.

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

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

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

Several years ago, as I was working on an earlier edition of this book, a tragic event occurred at the university where I teach. On a pleasant May night at the beginning of final exam week, a first-year student killed himself. The incident sent shock waves through this small, close-knit campus.

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

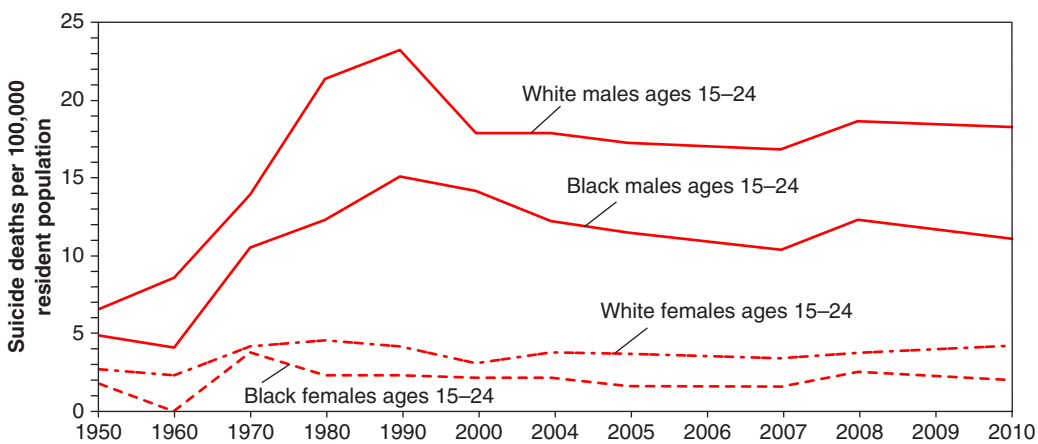
As tragic as this incident was, it was far from unique. Between 1950 and the 2010, the U.S. suicide rate more than doubled for people between the ages of 15 and 24 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014). Although the rate dropped between 1990 and 2000, it has recently increased again. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young Americans, following accidents and homicides, accounting for 20% of all deaths in this age group (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012c). In 2011, 15.8% of U.S. high school students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the previous year, and about 7.8% had actually attempted suicide one or more times during the same period (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012d).

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

Clearly, life in contemporary developed societies is focused on individual achievement—being well dressed, popular, and successful—more strongly than ever before. Young people face almost constant pressure to "measure up" and define their identities, and therefore their self-worth, according to standards set by others (Mannon, 1997). Although most adjust pretty well, others can't. In addition, as competition for scarce financial resources becomes more acute, young people are likely to experience heightened levels of stress and confusion about their own futures. When the quest for success begins earlier and earlier, the costs of not succeeding increase. Such changes may explain why suicides among young African American men (ages 15–24), once quite rare and still relatively less frequent than suicides among other ethnic groups, increased from 4.1 deaths per 100,000 people in 1960 to 15.1 deaths in 1990 (see Exhibit 1.1). The rate has since fallen to 11.1 per 100,000 people but is still almost triple what it was five decades ago (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014). Some experts blamed the increase on a growing sense of hopelessness and a long-standing cultural taboo against discussing mental health matters. Others, however, cited broader social factors, brought about, ironically, by the growing economy of the late 20th century. As more and more black families moved into the middle class, they felt increasing pressure to compete in traditionally white-dominated professions and social environments. In fact, black teenagers who committed suicide were more likely to come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than black teenagers in the general population (cited in Belluck, 1998).

You'll also notice in Exhibit 1.1 that the suicide rate of both black and white young men dropped in the early 2000s. Can you think of a sociological reason to account for this trend? Is it less stressful being a teenager today than it was 10 or 20 years ago?

Exhibit 1.1 Race, Gender, and Youth Suicide



SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, 2014, Table 39.

In other societies, different types of social changes may account for fluctuations in suicide rates. For instance, Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world (24.4 per 100,000 people; Nippon.com, 2014), nearly double that of the United States. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Japan saw its unemployment and bankruptcy rates rise to record levels as companies grappled with a severe economic recession. According to Japan's National Police Agency, more than 25% of suicides were caused by financial problems such as difficulty paying bills, finding a job, and keeping a business going (cited in Curtin, 2004). In fact, suicide became such a problem that the East Japan Railway Company installed blue lights above train platforms in its stations in hopes that they would have a soothing effect, thereby reducing the number of people who jump in front of trains to kill themselves ("Japanese Railways," 2009). Although the majority of suicides occur among people in their 60s, rates have increased especially dramatically among elementary school, middle school, and college students. Suicide is now the leading cause of death among Japanese youth (Nippon.com, 2014).

The stress of change due to rapid development has been linked to increased suicide rates in China, too, particularly among rural women, who are most likely to be displaced from their villages (E. Rosenthal, 2002). And in Ireland, which at one point had the fastest-growing rate of suicide in the world, one in four suicides occurs among those ages 15 to 24 (Clarity, 1999). Experts there attribute much of this increase to the weakening of religious prohibition of suicide and the alteration of gender roles, which has left many young men unsure of their place in Irish society.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM

A Sociological View of Suicide

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

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

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

After compiling his figures, Durkheim concluded that there are actually several different types of suicide. Sometimes, he found, people take their own lives when they see no possible way to improve their oppressive

(Continued)

(Continued)

circumstances. They come to the conclusion that suicide is preferable to a harsh life that will never improve. Think of prisoners serving life sentences or slaves who take their own lives to escape their miserable confinement and lack of freedom. Durkheim called this type of suicide ***fatalistic suicide.***

Other suicides, what he called ***anomic suicide***, occur when people's lives are suddenly disrupted by major social events, such as economic depressions, wars, and famines. At these times, he argued, the conditions around which people have organized their lives are dramatically altered, leaving them with a sense of hopelessness and despair as they come to realize they can no longer live the life to which they were accustomed. A study of suicide trends over the past 80 years found that overall rates tend to rise during economic recessions and fall during economic expansions (F. Luo, Florence, Quispe-Agnoli, Ouyang, & Crosby, 2011). Many experts attribute the 28% increase in suicides among U.S. adults between 35 and 64 to the recent economic downturn (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Similarly, the financial crisis currently gripping Europe has led to a spike in suicide rates in the hardest-hit countries such as Greece, Ireland, and Italy. The problem has become so pronounced that European newspapers have begun calling it "suicide by economic crisis" (Povoledo & Carvajal, 2012).

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

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

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

Durkheim feared that life in modern society tends to be individualistic and dangerously alienating. Over a century later, contemporary sociologists have found evidence supporting Durkheim's insight (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Riesman, 1950). Many people in the United States today don't know and have no desire to know their neighbors. Strangers are treated with suspicion. In the pursuit of economic opportunities, we have become more willing to relocate, sometimes to regions far from family and existing friends and colleagues—the very people who could and would offer support in times of need.

The structure of our communities discourages the formation of bonds with others, and, not surprisingly, the likelihood of suicide increases at the same time. In the United States today, the highest suicide rates can be found in sparsely populated states like Alaska, New Mexico, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014b). Exhibits 1.2a and 1.2b show this pattern. These states tend to have a larger proportion of new residents who are not part of an established community. People tend to be more isolated, less likely to seek help or comfort from others in times of trouble, and therefore more susceptible to suicide than people who live in more populous states. It's worth noting that sparsely populated rural areas also have higher rates of gun ownership than other areas of the United States. Over 70% of suicides in rural counties in the United States are committed with firearms (Butterfield, 2005).

Durkheim also felt, however, that another type of suicide (what he called ***altruistic suicide***) is more likely when the ties to one's community are too strong instead of too weak. He suggested that in certain societies, individuality is completely overshadowed by one's group membership; the individual literally lives for the group, and personality is merely a reflection of the collective identity of the community. In some cases, commitment to a particular political cause can be powerful enough to lead some people to take their own lives. In India, the number of politically motivated suicides doubled between 2006 and 2008. For example, 200 people have taken their own lives in support of efforts to establish a separate state, Telangana, in southern India (Polgreen, 2010). Spiritual loyalty can also lead to altruistic suicide. Some religious sects require their members to reject their ties to outside people and groups and to live by the values and customs of their new community. When members feel that they can no longer contribute to the group and sustain their value within it, they may take their own lives out of loyalty to group norms.

A terrible example of the deadly effects of overly strong ties occurred in 1989, when four young Korean sisters, ranging in age from 6 to 13, attempted to kill themselves by ingesting rat poison. The three older sisters survived; the youngest died. The eldest provided startling sociological insight into this seemingly senseless act: Their family was poor; the father supported everyone on a salary of about $362 a month. The girl told the authorities that the sisters had made a suicide pact to ease their parents' financial burden and leave enough money for the education of their 3-year-old brother. Within the traditional Korean culture, female children are much less important to the family than male children. These sisters attempted to take their lives not because they were depressed or unable to cope but because they felt obligated to sacrifice their personal well-being for the success of their family's male heir ("Korean Girls," 1989).

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

CONCLUSION

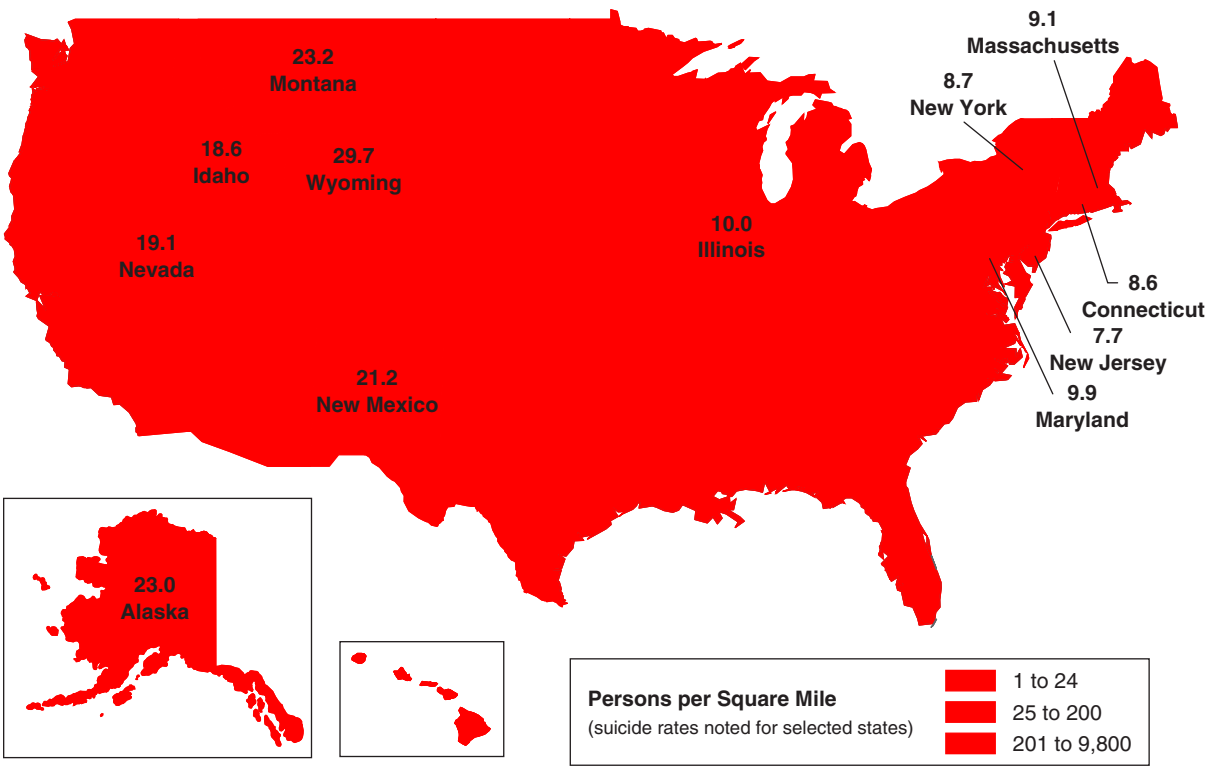
In the 21st century, understanding our place within cultural, historical, and global contexts is more important than ever. The world is shrinking. Communication technology binds us to people on the other side of the planet. Increasing ecological awareness opens our eyes to the far-reaching effects of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

Exhibit 1.2a Population Density and Suicide Rates in All 50 States (Suicides per 100,000 Residents)

State	Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population	Persons per Square Mile	State	Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population	Persons per Square Mile
United States	12.9	89.5	Missouri	15.2	87.9
Alabama	15.0	95.4	Montana	23.2	7.0
Alaska	23.0	1.3	Nebraska	12.5	24.3
Arizona	17.6	58.3	Nevada	19.0	25.4
Arkansas	16.4	56.9	New Hampshire	15.3	147.8
California	10.2	246.1	New Jersey	7.7	1,210.1
Colorado	20.3	50.8	New Mexico	21.2	17.2
Connecticut	10.2	742.6	New York	8.7	417.0
Delaware	13.6	475.1	North Carolina	13.2	202.6
District of Columbia	5.7	10,588.1	North Dakota	15.0	10.5
Florida	15.5	364.4	Ohio	13.4	283.2
Georgia	11.8	173.7	Oklahoma	17.6	56.1
Hawaii	13.6	218.6	Oregon	18.6	40.9
Idaho	18.6	19.5	Pennsylvania	12.9	285.5
Illinois	10.0	232.0	Rhode Island	10.0	1,017.1
Indiana	14.4	183.4	South Carolina	14.2	158.8
Iowa	12.5	55.3	South Dakota	16.9	11.1
Kansas	17.4	35.4	Tennessee	15.1	157.5
Kentucky	16.5	111.3	Texas	11.7	101.2
Louisiana	12.3	107.1	Utah	19.3	35.3
Maine	15.7	43.1	Vermont	13.9	68.0
Maryland	9.9	610.8	Virginia	13.0	209.2
Massachusetts	9.1	858.0	Washington	15.0	104.9
Michigan	12.8	175.0	West Virginia	17.6	77.1
Minnesota	12.2	68.1	Wisconsin	12.6	106.0
Mississippi	13.7	63.7	Wyoming	29.7	6.0

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011b, Tables 13 and 121.

Exhibit 1.2b States With the Highest and Lowest Suicide Rates



SOURCES: ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2015, Table 133; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014b, Table LCWK9.

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

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

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

YOUR TURN

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

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

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

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

KEY TERMS

altruistic suicide: Type of suicide that occurs where ties to the group or community are considered more important than individual identity

anomic suicide: Type of suicide that occurs when the structure of society is weakened or disrupted and people feel hopeless and disillusioned

comparative method: Research technique that compares existing official statistics and historical records across groups to test a theory about some social phenomenon

egoistic suicide: Type of suicide that occurs in settings where the individual is emphasized over group or community connections

fatalistic suicide: Type of suicide that occurs when people see no possible way to improve their oppressive circumstances

individualistic explanation: Tendency to attribute people's achievements and failures to their personal qualities

macrolevel: Way of examining human life that focuses on the broad social forces and structural features of society that exist above the level of individual people

microlevel: Way of examining human life that focuses on the immediate, everyday experiences of individuals

sociological imagination: Ability to see the impact of social forces on our private lives

sociology: Systematic study of human societies

CHAPTER

2

Seeing and Thinking Sociologically

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

Actually, much of the responsibility for these atrocities lay elsewhere, in a most unlikely place: among the ordinary, previously law-abiding Rwandan citizens. Many of the participants in the genocide were the least likely brutes you could imagine. For instance, here's how one woman described her husband, a man responsible for many Tutsi deaths:

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

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

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

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

Ordinary, well-balanced people—teachers, social workers, priests and nuns devoted to the ideals of charity and mercy, and physicians trained to heal and save lives—had changed, almost overnight, into cold-hearted killers. How could something like this have happened? The answer to this question lies in the sociological claim that individual behavior is largely shaped by social forces and situational contingencies. The circumstances of large-scale ethnic hatred and war have the power to transform well-educated, "nice" people with no previous history of violence into cruel butchers. Tragically, such forces were at work in many of the 20th and 21st centuries' most infamous examples of human brutality, such as the Nazi Holocaust during World War II and, more recently, large-scale ethnic massacres in Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, Burma, Kosovo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Darfur region of Sudan, as well as Rwanda.

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

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

HOW INDIVIDUALS STRUCTURE SOCIETY

Up to this point, I have used the word *society* rather loosely. Formally, sociologists define ***society*** as a population living in the same geographic area who share a culture and a common identity and whose members are subject to the same political authority. Societies may consist of people with the

same ethnic heritage or of hundreds of different groups who speak a multitude of languages. Some societies are highly industrialized and complex; others are primarily agricultural and relatively simple in structure. Some are very religious; others are distinctly secular.

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

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

But this view is only one side of the sociological coin. The sociological imagination also encourages us to see that each individual has a role in forming a society and influencing the course of its history. As we navigate our social environments, we respond in ways that may modify the effects and even the nature of that environment (House, 1981). As one sociologist has written,

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

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

Imagine two people sitting on a park bench in 2015 discussing the threat of ISIS—the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—a deadly terrorist organization known for its numerous massacres of civilians, video recordings of the beheadings of western hostages, and control of large areas of northern and western Iraq. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2014) estimates that ISIS killed upwards of 30,000 people and displaced another 2 million in the first 8 months of 2014 alone. Person A believes that the United States should intervene with the full force of its military—land, sea, and air—to destroy the organization before it gets any stronger and takes over the entire Middle East. Person B believes that the U.S. should stay out of it, expressing fear that we could be drawn into another costly military action where we have no clear allies, no chance of victory, and no clear exit strategy. The debate becomes heated: One person thinks that we have an ethical obligation to come to the aid of people being massacred; furthermore, if we don't get involved, we will be seen as weak, thereby placing our own citizens at risk of attack both here and abroad. The other

person thinks we have more pressing problems to attend to at home and supports a strategy of limited involvement: intelligence sharing, economic sanctions, and the training of local forces to fight their own battle. These two people obviously don't agree on the role that the United States should play in international humanitarian crises. But merely by discussing the threat of ISIS, they are acknowledging that such a phenomenon exists. In talking about such matters, people give shape and substance to society's ideals and values (Hewitt, 1988).

Even something as apparently unchangeable as our collective past can be shaped and modified by individuals. We usually think of history as a fixed, unalterable collection of social events that occurred long ago; only in science fiction novels or those old *Back to the Future* movies can one "go back" and change the past. No one would question that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776; that John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963; that hijackers flew passenger jets into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001; that two brothers set off bombs at the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013, killing 3 and injuring 264; that a Malaysian Airlines passenger jet with 283 passengers and 15 crew members on board was shot down as it flew over the Ukraine on July 17, 2014; or that the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage on June 26, 2015.

Although such historical events themselves don't change, their meaning and relevance can. Consider the celebration in 1992 of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to the Americas. For generations, American schoolchildren have been taught that Columbus's 1492 "discovery" represented a triumphant step forward for Western civilization. We even have a holiday in his honor. However, increasing sensitivity to the past persecution of Native Americans has forced many people to reconsider the historical meaning of Columbus's journey. In fact, some historians now consider this journey and what followed it to be one of history's most dismal examples of reckless and deadly prejudice. So, you see, history might best be regarded as a work in progress.

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

Consider the story of a Pakistani girl named Malala Yousafzai. In 2009, when she was 11, Malala began writing a blog for the BBC detailing her life under the Taliban who, at the time, were seeking to control the Swat Valley region of Pakistan where she lived. She wrote about the importance of education for young girls, something the Taliban were trying to ban. As her blog gained a greater international following, she became more prominent, giving interviews in newspapers and on television. But her increased visibility also meant that she was becoming a greater threat to the Taliban. So in October, 2012, a gunman boarded Malala's school bus, walked directly up to her, and shot her in the face. She remained unconscious for days and was flown to a hospital in England. Not only did she survive the shooting, but she redoubled her efforts to advocate on behalf of girls' education all around the world. The assassination attempt received worldwide coverage and provoked an outpouring of international sympathy. The United Nations drafted a petition in her name calling on Pakistan—and other countries—to end educational discrimination against girls. Since then, she has spoken before the United Nations, met with world leaders like Queen Elizabeth and President Obama, and, in 2014—at the ripe old age of 17—was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Although she has not been able to return to her home country since she was shot, her work and perseverance have spawned a global movement to ensure educational access for all girls. The Malala Fund has raised over $3.5 million for local education projects in places like Kenya, Jordan, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Pakistan to secure girls' rights to a minimum of 12 years of quality education (Malala Fund, 2015).

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

We live in a world with other people. I know that's not the most profound statement you've ever read, so you can stop yawning. But it is key to understanding the sociology of human behavior. Our everyday lives are a collection of brief encounters, extended conversations, intimate interactions, and chance collisions with other people. In our early years, we may have our parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and grandparents to contend with. Soon, we begin to form friendships with others outside our families. Over time, our lives also become filled with connections to other people—classmates, teachers, coworkers, bosses, spiritual leaders, therapists—who are neither family nor friends but who have an enormous impact on us. And, of course, we have frequent experiences with total strangers: the person at the local coffee shop who serves us our daily latte, the traveler who sits next to us on an airplane, the tech support specialist who helps us when our documents won't print or our iPads freeze.

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

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

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

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

Contact with people is essential to a person's social development. But there is much more to social life than simply bumping into others from time to time. We act and react to things

and people in our environment as a result of the meaning we attach to them. At the sight of Mokolodi, my big goofy Labrador retriever, playfully barreling toward it, a squirrel instinctively runs away. A human, however, does not have such an automatic reaction. We've all learned from past experiences that some animals are approachable and others aren't. So we can think, "Do I know this dog? Is it friendly or mean? Does it want to lick my face or tear me limb from limb?" and respond accordingly. In short, we usually interpret events in our environment before we react.

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

And our personal contentment and generosity can be linked to others as well. One recent study found that just knowing someone who is happy—whether she or he is a relative, friend, or acquaintance—significantly increases your own chances of happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Such influence can be found in the online world, too. Twitter users prefer to follow other Twitter users who exhibit comparable moods. That is, happy users tend to retweet or reply to other happy users (Bollen, Gonçalves, Ruan, & Mao, 2012). Research also suggests that the presence of female family members (wives, sisters, daughters, mothers) can make men more generous, compassionate, and empathetic. The founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, has consistently cited the inspiration provided by his wife and mother in setting up his charitable foundation, which has given away tens of billions of dollars.

The influence of others goes beyond emotions, behaviors, and performances. Even our physical well-being is affected by those around us. According to researchers in Japan, the risk of heart attack is three times higher among women who live with their husbands and their husbands' parents than among women who just live with their husbands (cited in Rabin, 2008).

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

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

STANLEY MILGRAM

Ordinary People and Cruel Acts

If a being from another planet were to learn the history of human civilization, it would probably conclude that we are tremendously cruel, vicious, and evil creatures. From ethnic genocides to backwater lynchings to war crimes to school bullying, humans have always shown a powerful tendency to viciously turn on their fellow humans.

The curious thing is that people involved in such acts often show a profound capacity to deny responsibility for their behavior by pointing to the influence of others: "My friend made me do it" or "I was only following orders." That leaves us with a very disturbing question: Can an ordinary, decent person be pressured by another to commit an act of extreme cruelty? Or, conversely, do cruel actions require inherently cruel people?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Milgram's study has generated a tremendous amount of controversy. For over four decades, this pivotal piece of research has been replicated, discussed, and debated by social scientists (Burger, 2009). It has made its way into popular culture, turning up in novels, plays, films, and songs (Blass, 2004). Since the original study, other researchers have found that in small groups, people sometimes collectively rebel against what they perceive to be unjust authority (Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1982). Nevertheless, Milgram's findings are discomforting. It would be much easier to conclude that the acts of inhumanity we read about in our daily newspapers (such as soldiers raping civilians or killing unarmed noncombatants) are the products of defective or inherently evil individuals—a few "bad apples." All society would have to do then is identify, capture, and separate these psychopaths from the rest of us. But if Milgram is right—if most of us could become evil given the "right" combination of situational circumstances—then the only thing that distinguishes us from evildoers is our good fortune and our social environment.

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

Social life is more than individual people affecting one another's lives. Society is not just a sum of its human parts; it's also the way those parts are put together, related to each other, and organized (Coulson & Riddell, 1980). Statuses, roles, groups, organizations, and institutions are the building blocks of society. Culture is the mortar that holds these blocks together. Although society is dynamic and constantly evolving, it has an underlying macrolevel structure that persists.

Statuses and Roles

One key element of any society is its collection of ***statuses***—the positions that individuals within the society occupy. When most of us hear the word *status*, we tend to associate it with rank or prestige. But here we're talking about a status as any socially defined position a person can occupy: cook, daughter, anthropologist, husband, computer nerd, electrician, Facebook friend, shoplifter, and so on. Some statuses may, in fact, be quite prestigious, such as president. But others carry very little prestige, such as gas station attendant. Some statuses require a tremendous amount of training, such as physician; others, such as ice cream lover, require little effort or none at all.

We all occupy many statuses at the same time. I am a college professor, but I am also a son, uncle, father, brother, husband, friend, sushi lover, dog owner, occasional poker player, aging athlete with a bad back, homeowner, and author. My behavior at any given moment is dictated to a large degree by the status that's most important at that particular time. When I am training for a half marathon, my status as professor is not particularly relevant. But if I decide to run in a race instead of showing up to proctor the final exam in my sociology course, I may be in big trouble!

Sociologists often distinguish between ascribed and achieved statuses. An ***ascribed status*** is a social position we acquire at birth or enter involuntarily later in life. Our race, sex, ethnicity,

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

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

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

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

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

We feel the power of role expectations most clearly when we have difficulty meeting them or when we occupy two conflicting statuses simultaneously. Sociologists use the term ***role strain*** to refer to situations in which people lack the necessary resources to fulfill the demands of a particular role, such as when parents can't afford to provide their children with adequate food, clothing, or shelter. Sometimes this strain can be deadly. For instance, physicians are more than twice as likely to commit suicide than non-physicians and almost 10% of fourth-year medical students and first year residents have had suicidal thoughts (cited in Sinha, 2014). Why? Young doctors feel significant pressure to project intellectual and emotional confidence in the face of life-or-death situations. As one first year resident put it, "we masquerade as strong and untroubled professionals even in our darkest and most