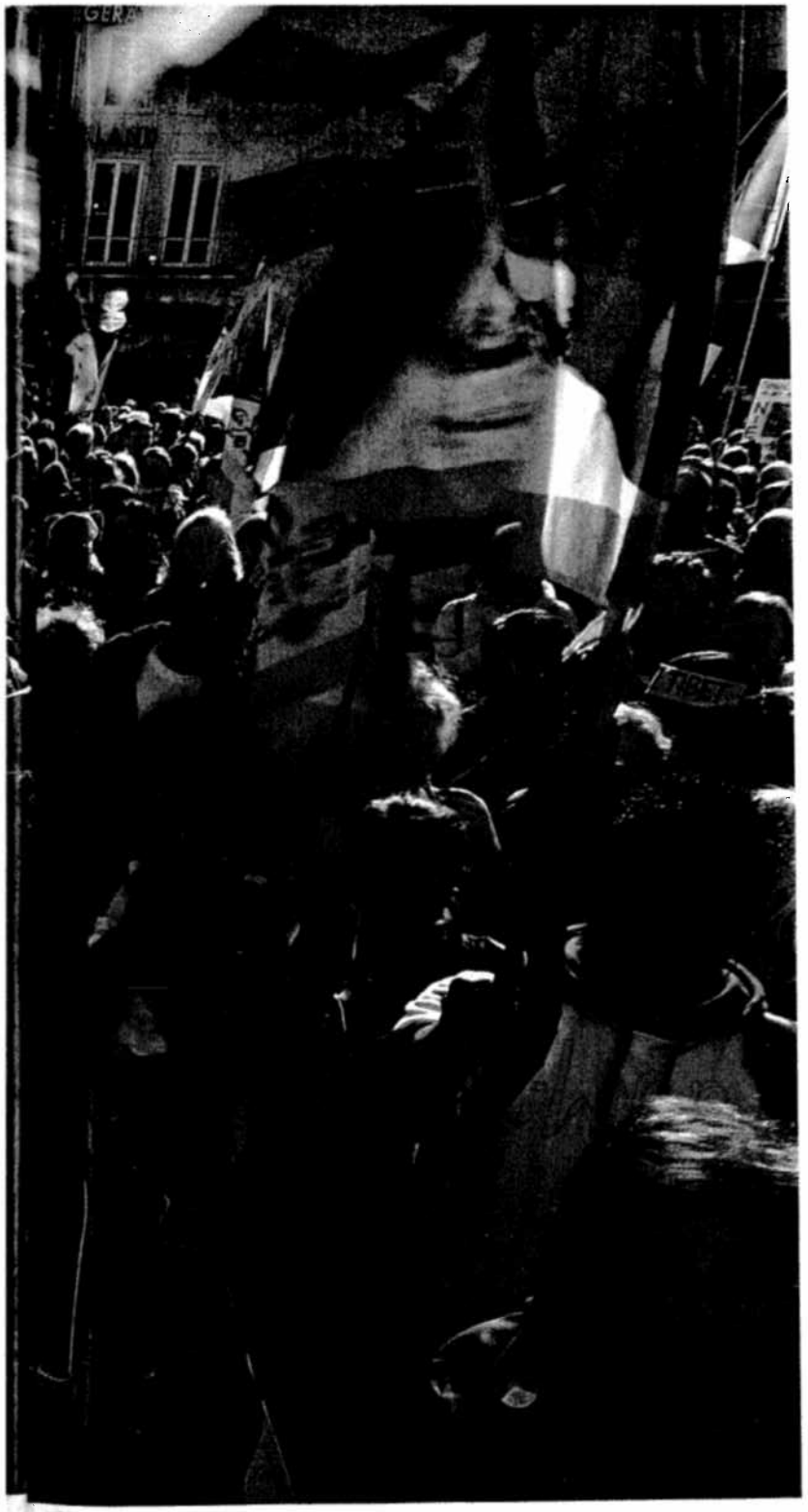


ICAL IMAGINATION

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THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

George Bailey never got the chance to live the kind of life he wanted to live. He desperately wanted to escape small-town life, go to college, travel the world, design bridges, and achieve even more, but obligations and a sense of duty conspired against him. Now, feeling like a failure, he stands on a snowy bridge ready to commit suicide. So begins the holiday film classic *It's a Wonderful Life.*

Just as George prepares to jump, an angel named Clarence shows up and gives him a chance to see what the world would have been like had George never existed. It is not a pretty sight. People die whom George helped save, homes are lost that his family building-and-loan business helped finance, and life in the local community is grim largely due to the underhanded dealings of the evil tycoon Mr. Potter. George learns that he has had a major impact on family, friends, and community. In the words of Clarence, "One [person's] life touches so many others, when he [or she]'s not there, it leaves an awfully big hole." George changes his mind about suicide and rushes home to waiting family and friends, who unite to save his business from financial ruin.

The film's focus on the relationship between the individual and society is fundamentally sociological. On the one hand, the film presents a story about one of the lessons learned from sociology: that our individual actions matter and that it is through our actions that "society" is made. On the other hand, the film is also about the power of community, of family, and of social context. It is about the ways in which the options available to us are limited by position and circumstance.

Perhaps there is a bit of George Bailey in all of us. We create society by the choices we make and the things we do. At the same time, we are products of society, shaped by the people around us. For each of us, just as for George Bailey, many endings are possible—that is the nature of individual choice—but not all endings are equally probable—that is the nature of social position and the unequal distribution of resources. Throughout its history, sociology has sought to describe and explain this relationship between the individual and society.

As You READ >>

- What is sociology?
- How do sociologists look at the world?
- How might someone practice sociology?







>> What Is Sociology?

We need each other. We may like to think that we can make it on our own, but our individualism is made possible by our interdependence. We praise the Olympic gold medalist for her impressive skill, dedicated training, and single-minded determination. Yet, if it weren't for her mom driving her to the pool every day, for the building manager waking up at 4:00 A.M. to make sure the pool is open, for the women working overnight to make sure the locker room is clean and safe, and so many others who fade into the background in such moments of glory, she would never have had that chance to stand on the podium.

sociology The systematic study of the relationship between the individual and society and of the consequences of difference.

sociological imagination An awareness of the relationship between an individual and the wider society.

private troubles Obstacles that individuals face as individuals rather than as a consequence of their social position.

Sociology as a discipline is committed to investigating and understanding the full scope of our interdependence. **Sociology** is the systematic study of the relationship between the individual and society and of the consequences of difference. It focuses on social relationships, looking at how others influence our behavior; how major social institutions like the government, religion, and the economy affect us; and how we ourselves affect other individuals, groups, and even organizations. In doing this analysis, sociologists focus less on what one individual does or does not do than on what people do as members of a group or in interaction with one another, and on what that means for individuals and for society as a whole.

Sociology at its heart seeks to understand and explain our interdependence. With whom do we connect? How do we organize those connections? What gets in the way? Who benefits? Whether sitting in a classroom, working in an office or a factory, or exercising in a health club, we rely on others who shape how we think and act. As individuals, we do choose, but we cannot divorce our individual preferences from the influence of parents, teachers, friends, enemies, the media, and more, or from our access to resources such as money, social networks, and knowledge. We influence and are influenced by the world around us. Sociology studies those influences.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Sociology is a way of seeing the world. A leading sociologist, C. Wright Mills, described this perspective as the **sociological imagination**—an awareness of the relationship between an individual and the wider society. This awareness allows us to look at how we as individuals connect with the larger social and historical forces that shape our lives, to comprehend the links between our immediate, personal social settings and the remote, impersonal social world that surrounds and helps to shape us. Mills wrote that "neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both" (1959:3). Practicing the sociological imagination involves grasping the intersection between biography and history, between self and society.

A key element in the sociological imagination is the ability to view our society as an outsider might, rather than relying only on our individual perspective, which is shaped by our cultural biases. Consider something as simple as sporting events. On college campuses across the United States, thousands of students cheer for well-trained football players. In Bali, Indonesia, dozens of spectators gather around a ring to cheer on well-trained roosters engaged in cockfights. In both instances, the spectators root for their favorites and might bet on the outcome. Yet what is considered a normal sporting event in one part of the world is considered unusual in another part.

In applying the sociological imagination, Mills (1959) suggested that we distinguish between obstacles that individuals face as individuals, which he called **private troubles,** and obstacles that individuals in similar positions

face, which he called **public issues**—or what sociologists often call "social problems." Consider unemployment. An individual might lose his or her job because of some inappropriate action or personal incompetence. In such an instance, it might be enough to explain what happened only on an individual level—we might say that the person got what he or she deserved. In applying the sociological imagination, however, we know that unemployment rates vary based on shifts in the larger economy. At such times, to blame unemployment only on individuals is an insufficient diagnosis of the problem. For example, a rise in gas prices leads to an increase in transportation prices, which leads to a rise in product costs, which leads to a decrease in demand, which leads to fewer production workers, which leads to layoffs and unemployment. Even in the above instance, the individual's inappropriate action or personal incompetence may be tied to social position, which shaped his or her access to resources, knowledge, and training.

public issues Obstacles that individuals in similar positions face; also referred to by sociologists as "social problems."

The sociological imagination is an empowering tool. It allows us to go beyond a limited understanding of human behavior, to see the world and its people in a new way and through a broader lens than we might otherwise use. It may be as simple as understanding why a roommate prefers country music to hip-hop, or it may open up a whole new way of understanding other populations in the world. For example, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many Americans wanted to understand how Muslims throughout the world perceived their country, and why. It was Mills' hope that we would use the sociological imagination to understand the impact that society has on our lives.

5 Movies on THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION



Castaway
A man is isolated from society on a remote, deserted island.

Mockingbird Don't Sing
Inspired by the story of Genie; a girl is introduced to society for the first time after being held captive for the first 12 years of her life.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone
A young boy is introduced to an entirely new society of wizards for the first time at age 11.

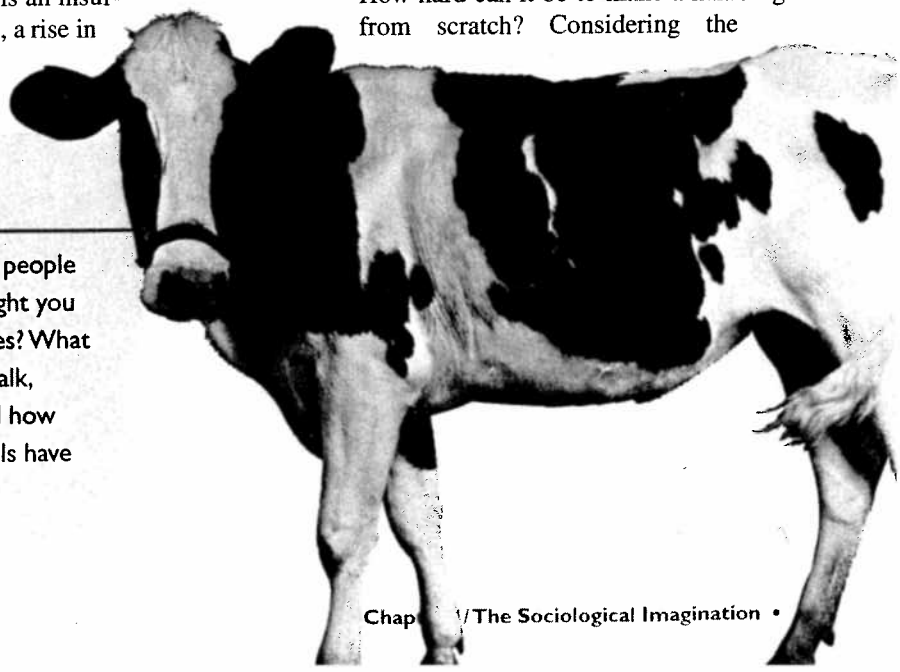
Babel
How individual cultures and societies view and interact with each other.

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest
Normalization of individuals in society; taking oneself out of mainstream society and finding a niche (in this case, a mental institution).

THE HAMBURGER AS MIRACLE

Many people take for granted that it would be easy to provide for their needs if they had to, and they are eager to strike out on their own and prove themselves. As an example of using the sociological imagination, however, suppose you had to do something as seemingly simple as making a hamburger but had to do so without relying on any knowledge, skills, tools, or resources obtained from someone else. Without an interdependent network of people performing myriad small tasks that we take for granted, we would be hard-pressed to provide for ourselves. As we will see, like anything we might produce, a hamburger is a miracle because it is a symbol of our society's shared knowledge and skills.

How hard can it be to make a hamburger from scratch? Considering the



SOCthink

> > > Imagine spending the afternoon people watching at the mall. What differences might you observe in how people present themselves? What factors might shape how they dress and talk, whether they are alone or in a group, and how much they buy? How might C. Wright Mills have explained such differences?

ingredients, which seem fairly simple, there are any number of ways to proceed. Let's begin with the burger itself. First, you need to find a cow. How hard can that be? Well, you can't buy one from a farmer, as doing so means relying on resources from others. For the same reason, you can't go out to the country (getting there itself might present something of a challenge) and steal one from a farm (which implies a farmer, which means dependence on another person). So you need to find a wild cow.

Assuming you do find a wild cow, you then have to kill it. Perhaps you might bash it with a large rock or stampede it off a cliff. Next, you need to butcher it, but cow hide is tough. Imagine what it takes to produce a metal knife (finding ore, smelting, forging, tempering, and so on). Perhaps a sharp rock will do. Assuming you came up with a cutting tool, you now have a chunk of raw cow meat. Given that it's hamburger we're after (though you might want to settle for steak at this point), next you need to grind the meat. You might use a couple of those rocks to pulverize the meat into something of a meat mash, although a meat grinder would work better if it weren't so hard to make one. In any event, at last you have a raw hamburger patty.

Now you need to cook it. How will you do that? Where will you get the fire? Perhaps you could strike two rocks together in hopes of creating a spark, or maybe rub two sticks together. If you were allowed to get help from an outside source, you might check how Tom Hanks' character did it in the film *Cast Away*—but you aren't. Perhaps it would be easiest to wait around for lightning to strike a nearby tree. In any case, after you get fire, you still have to cook the meat. No frying pans are available, so either you make one or perhaps cook it on that handy rock you used to kill the cow. Or you could just put the meat on a stick that you cut down and whittled with the knife you made (or was that a "sharp" stone?) and roast it over the fire.

Assuming you are successful, you now have a cooked hamburger patty. But that's not enough. There are still many other steps that need to be completed. You need a bun, which involves figuring out how to come up with flour, water, salt, oil, sugar, and yeast. What about condiments such as ketchup, mustard, pickles, and onions? What if at the end of all that you decide to make it a cheeseburger?

Making something that seems so simple, that we take for granted, that we can get for a dollar at McDonald's, turns out to be quite complicated. The knowledge and skill to acquire all the ingredients in a hamburger is beyond the capacity of most individuals. Yet when we eat a burger, we think nothing of it. When you think about it—when you apply the sociological imagination—the hamburger seems a miracle. It's miraculous not in a supernatural sense, but as a symbol pointing to the astonishing complexity and taken-for-grantedness of our human interdependence and to the knowledge we share collectively without even realizing it. Of course, this is true not just for hamburgers but for virtually any product we use. It could be a veggieburger, a book, a desk, a shirt, a car, a house, or a computer. Look around you and try to imagine making, by yourself, all the things that we as humans have produced. The knowledge and skill that these things represent is overwhelming. Thankfully, our interdependence means that we do not have to rely on our own knowledge and skill alone for our survival.

> **The function of sociology, as of every science, is to reveal that which is hidden.**
>
> **Pierre Bourdieu**

KEY COMPONENTS OF SOCIOLOGY

To better understand what sociology involves, we will look at each of the four key components of the definition in turn.

Systematic Study Sociologists are engaged with the world, gathering empirical data through systematic research. Relying on empirical data means that sociologists draw their conclusions about society based on experiences or observations rather than beliefs or the authority of others. If they want to understand the impact of television on community or the phenomenon of binge drinking on college campuses, they must gather data from those involved in these activities and base their conclusions upon that information.

Sociological research historically has been divided between quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection. Quantitative approaches emphasize counting things and analyzing them mathematically or statistically. The most common way to collect this type of data is through surveys. In contrast, qualitative approaches focus on listening to and observing people and allowing them to interpret what is happening in their own lives. The most common way to collect this type of data is through participant observation, in which the researcher interacts with those she or he studies. In practice, sociologists often draw on both techniques in conducting their research. We will investigate these research techniques, along with others, in more detail in Chapter 2.

The Individual Although sociology is most commonly associated with the study of groups, there is no such thing as a group apart from the individuals who compose it. As individuals we are constantly choosing what do to next.

Most of the time, we follow guidelines for behavior we have learned from others, but we have the ability to reject those guidelines at any time. A term sociologists sometimes use to describe this capacity is **agency,** meaning the freedom individuals have to choose and to act. In professional sports, for example, we use the term "free agent" to describe a player who has the power to negotiate with whatever team he or she wishes. We, too, have such freedom. We could choose not to go to class, not to go to work, not to get out of bed in the morning, not to obey traffic signals, not to respond when spoken to, not to read the next sentence in this book, and on and on.



"Actually, Lou, I think it was more than just my being in the right place at the right time. I think it was my being the right race, the right religion, the right sex, the right socioeconomic group, having the right accent, the right clothes, going to the right schools . . ."

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Our self exists in an interactive relationship with its environment, and we act within the context of our relationships. The same is true for that sports free agent. While he or she can choose any team, in order to get a big payday, he or she is limited to choosing within the confines of the league. Our choices, too, are constrained by our positions. Having access to varieties of resources, we choose among an array of options with knowledge of various possible outcomes. We usually follow "paths of least resistance"—the accepted and expected actions and beliefs—but the choice of whether to continue to follow them is ours each and every second of our lives (Johnson 1997).

Society The study of society is at the core of sociology. While we will spend most of this book describing various aspects of society, we can begin by thinking of it as our social environment. Society consists of persistent patterns of relationships and social networks within which we operate. The social structure it provides is analogous to a building: the structure of a building both encourages and discourages different activities in different rooms (such as kitchens, bedrooms, and bathrooms), and many of the most essential operations of a building (such as heating and air conditioning) are mostly invisible to us. In the same way, the structure of our *institutions*—a term sociologists use to describe some of the key components of social structure, including economy, family, education, government, and religion—shapes what is expected of us. For example, the choices that are available to us in the context of the modern family, such as to go off and pursue our own education and career, are much different than the obligations we would face in more traditional family contexts. Nested within institutions are the groups, subgroups, and statuses that we occupy. Within the context of society, we construct culture and engage in social interaction. We will address the topics of structure, culture, and interaction in detail in coming chapters.

agency The freedom individuals have to choose and to act.

The Consequences of Difference The final part of the definition of sociology involves the consequences of difference. Sociology does more than just describe our structure, culture, and interaction; it also looks at how economic, social, and cultural resources are distributed and at



the consequences of these patterns in terms of the opportunities and obstacles they create for individuals and groups.

social inequality A condition in which members of society have differing amounts of wealth, prestige, or power.

science The body of knowledge obtained by methods based on systematic observation.

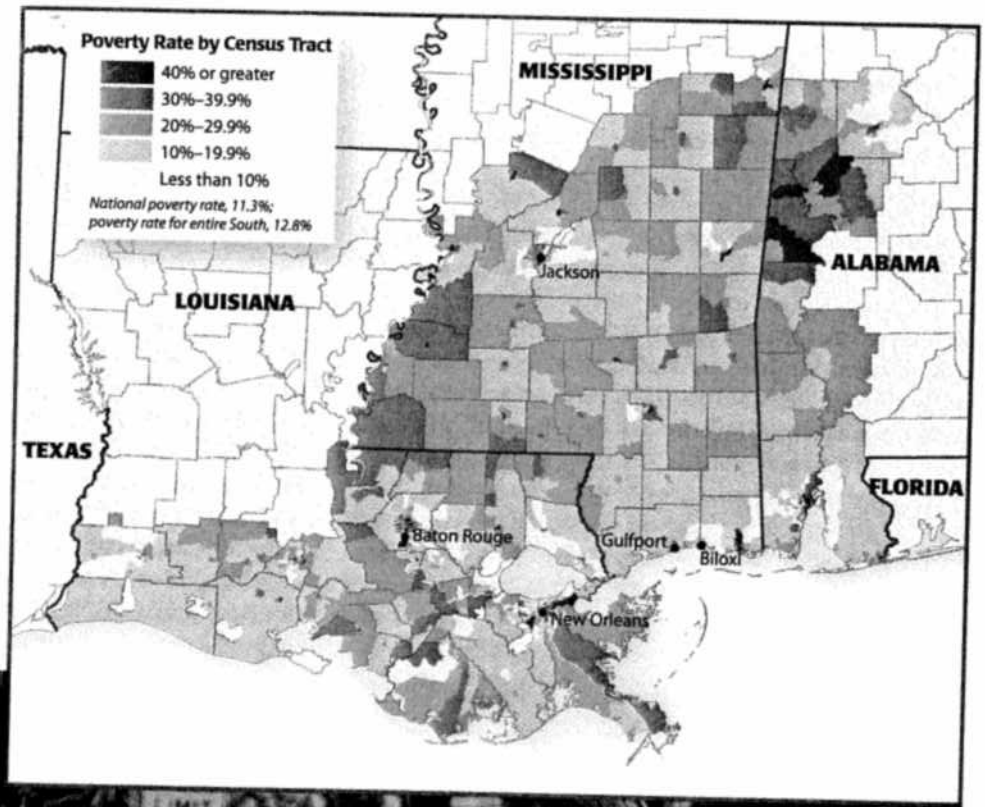
Since the founding of sociology, sociologists have been concerned with the impact our social positions have on our opportunities or lack thereof.

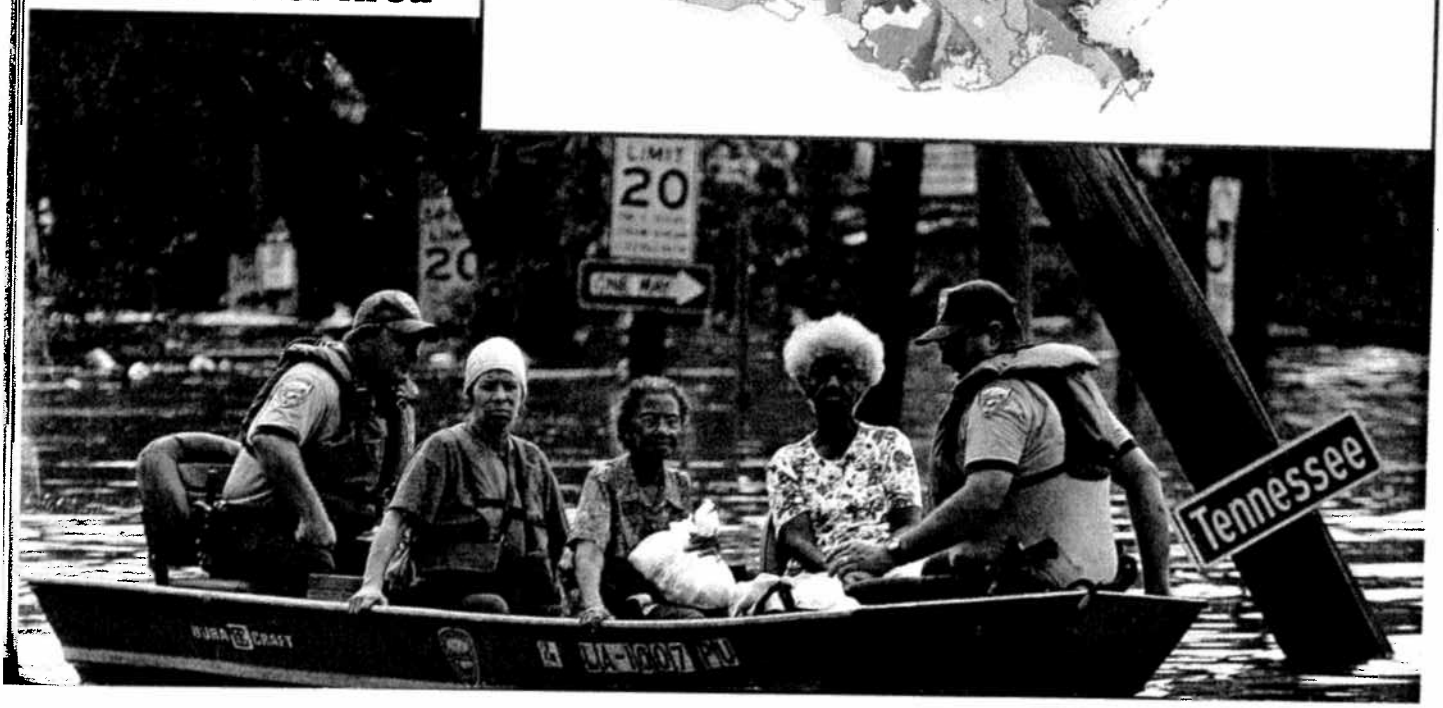
Sociologists have noted, for example, that the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami affected Indonesian men and women differently. When the waves hit, following traditional cultural patterns, mothers and grandmothers were at home with the children; men were outside working, where they were more likely to become aware of the impending disaster. Moreover, most of the men knew how to swim, a survival skill that women in these traditional societies usually do not learn. As a result, many more men than women survived the catastrophe—about 10 men for every 1 woman. In one typical Indonesian village, 97 of 1300 people survived; only 4 were women. The impact of this gender imbalance will be felt for some time, given women's primary role as caregivers for children and the elderly (BBC 2005a).

The analysis of social power deserves particular attention because it shapes how and why we think and act as we do. The simple fact is that those who have access to and control over valued material, social, and cultural resources have different options available to them than do those without such access. One of the main tasks of sociology is to reveal and report the degree of **social inequality**—a condition in which members of society have differing amounts of wealth, prestige, or power. That is why the definition of sociology draws particular attention to the consequences of difference.

In combination, these four aspects of sociology help us to understand the things that influence our beliefs and actions and, in so doing, can help us to make choices that are more free. Failure to appreciate the relationship between the individual and society, for example, leads us to misdiagnose our individual and social problems, and so to develop inadequate cures for those things that ail us. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998a) put it this way: "Sociology teaches how groups function and how to make use of the laws governing the way they function so as to try to circumvent them" (p. 57). Only by appreciating the degree

Poverty Rates in Hurricane Katrina Disaster Area





to which our thoughts and actions are determined by our social position and our lack of freedom are we able to make more realistic choices to change ourselves and our worlds.

SOCIOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Is sociology a science? The term **science** refers to the body of knowledge obtained by methods based on systematic observation. Just like other scientific disciplines, sociology involves the organized, systematic study of phenomena (in this case, human behavior) in order to enhance understanding. All scientists, whether studying mushrooms or murderers, attempt to collect precise information through methods of study that are as objective as possible. They rely on the careful recording of observations and the accumulation of data.

Of course, there is a great difference between, say, sociology and physics, or between psychology and astronomy. For this reason, the sciences are commonly divided into natural and social sciences. **Natural science** is the study of the physical features of nature and the ways in which they interact and change. Astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, and physics are all natural sciences. **Social science** is the study of the social features of humans and the ways in which they interact and change. The social sciences include sociology, anthropology, economics, history, psychology, and political science.

These social science disciplines have a common focus on the social behavior of people, yet each has a particular orientation. Anthropologists usually study past cultures and preindustrial societies that continue today, as well as the origins of humans. Economists explore the ways in which people produce and exchange goods and services, along with money and other resources. Historians are concerned with the peoples and events of the past and their significance for us today. Psychologists investigate personality and individual behavior. Political scientists study international relations, the workings of government, and the exercise of power and authority. Sociologists, as we have already seen, study the influence that society has on people's attitudes and behavior and the ways in which people interact and shape society.

Let's consider how different social sciences would study the impact of Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005. Historians would compare the damage done by natural disasters in the 20th century to that caused by Katrina. Economists would conduct research on the economic impact of the damage, not just in the Southeast but throughout the nation and the world. Psychologists would study individual cases to assess the emotional trauma of the event. And political scientists would study the stances taken by different elected officials, along with their implications for the government's response to the disaster.

What approach would sociologists take? They might look at Katrina's impact on different communities and on different social classes. Some sociologists have undertaken neighborhood and community studies to determine how to maintain the integrity of storm-struck neighborhoods during the rebuilding phase. Researchers have focused in particular on Katrina's impact on marginalized groups; they found that issues of race, class, and disability were key. The disaster area was among the poorest in the United States. In terms of family income, for example, New Orleans ranked 63rd (7th lowest) among the nation's 70 largest cities. With Katrina bearing down on the Gulf Coast, thousands of poor inner-city residents had no automobiles or other available means by which to escape the storm. Added to that difficulty was the high incidence of disability in the area. New Orleans ranked second among the nation's 70 largest cities in the proportion of people over age 65 who are disabled—56 percent. Moving wheelchair-bound residents to safety requires specially equipped vehicles, to say nothing of handicap-accessible accommodations in public shelters. Clearly, officials must consider such factors in developing evacuation plans (Bureau of the Census 2005f).

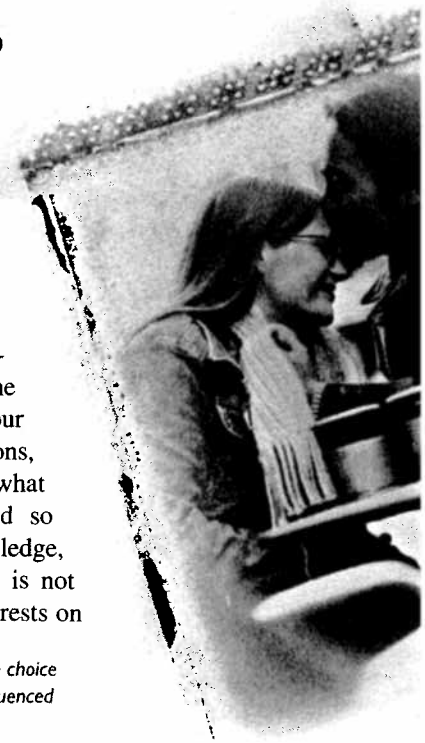
natural science The study of the physical features of nature and the ways in which they interact and change.

social science The study of the social features of humans and the ways in which they interact and change.

Sociologists would take a similar approach in studying episodes of extreme violence. In March 2007, just as students at Virginia Tech were beginning to focus on the impending end of the semester, tragedy struck. In a two-hour shooting spree, a mentally disturbed senior armed with automatic weapons killed a total of 32 students and faculty at Virginia's largest university. Observers struggled to describe the events and place them in some social context. For sociologists in particular, the event raised numerous issues and topics for study, including the role of the media in reporting breaking news events, the presence of violence in schools, the politics of gun control, concerns about gender, the inadequacy of the nation's mental health care system, and the stereotyping and stigmatizing of people who suffer from mental illness.

SOCIOLOGY AND COMMON SENSE

At times all of us practice some form of the sociological imagination, weighing the balance between individual and society. So what's the difference between sociology and common sense—the knowledge we get from our experiences and conversations, from what we read, from what we see on television, and so forth? Commonsense knowledge, while sometimes accurate, is not always reliable, because it rests on



Sociological research shows that the choice of a marriage partner is heavily influenced by societal expectations.

commonly held beliefs rather than on systematic analysis of facts.

Contrary to the common notion that women tend to be chatty compared to men, for instance, researchers have found little difference between the sexes in terms of their talkativeness. Over a five-year period, they placed unobtrusive microphones on 396 college students in various settings, on campuses in Mexico as well as the United States. They found that both men and women spoke about 16,000 words per day (Mehl et al. 2007).

theory In sociology a set of statements that seeks to explain problems, actions, or behavior.

Similarly, "common sense" tells us that in the United States today, military marriages are more likely to end in separation or divorce than in the past due to the strain of long deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet a study released in 2007 shows no significant increase in the divorce rate among U.S. soldiers over the past decade. In fact, the rate of marital dissolution among members of the military is comparable to that of nonmilitary families. Interestingly, this is not the first study to disprove the widely held notion that military service strains the marital bond. Two generations earlier, during the Vietnam era, researchers came to the same conclusion (Call and Teachman 1991; Karney and Crown 2007).

Like other social scientists, sociologists do not accept something as fact just because "everyone knows it." At times, the findings of sociologists may seem like common sense because they deal with familiar facets of everyday life. The difference is that such findings have been tested by researchers, analyzed in relation to other data, and evaluated in light of what is known by sociologists in the form of sociological theory.

>> What Is Sociological Theory?

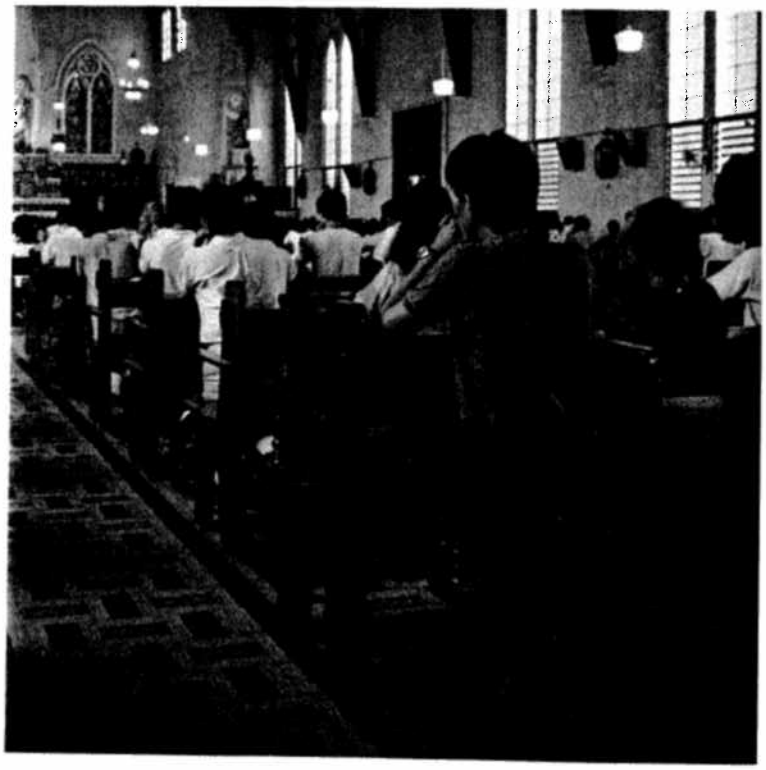
Sociology, like all sciences, involves a conversation between theory and research. We gather data through systematic research, and we seek to describe and explain what we find using theories. Theories represent our attempts to tell the stories of our lives but they do so in a particular way. Initially, theories might be general and vague. However, over time, as they become more fully informed by research, they are modified and refined into fuller, more accurate accounts of why we think and act as we do. Émile Durkheim's research on suicide provides a classic example.

FORMULATING SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Why do people commit suicide? Durkheim's answer to this question over a hundred years ago helped to establish sociology as a discipline. Among the traditional commonsense answers that Durkheim rejected were the notions that people inherit the desire to kill themselves or that sunspots drive people to take their own lives. He even suspected that psychological or biological explanations that pointed toward depression or chemical imbalance as causal factors were insufficient. He sought to prove that social forces existed that influenced an individual's likelihood of committing suicide.

In order to undertake this research, Durkheim developed a theory that offered a general explanation of suicidal behavior. We can think of theories as attempts to explain events, forces, materials, ideas, or behavior in a comprehensive manner. In sociology a **theory** is a set of statements that seeks to explain problems, actions, or behavior. An effective theory may have both explanatory and predictive power. That is, it can help us to see the relationships among seemingly isolated phenomena, as well as to understand how one type of change in an environment leads to other changes.

Durkheim theorized that people commit suicide because they lack the social integration to prevent them from taking this most final and individualistic of all acts. His hypothesis was this: "Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part" ([1897] 1951:209). He chose religious affiliation as an indicator of social integration, arguing that Protestants are less socially integrated than are Roman Catholics. He claimed that Catholicism is a traditional faith with a hierarchical system of authority in which variation in belief (on such topics as birth control, abortion, married priests, and women priests) is not up to the individual. Protestantism, in contrast, puts the Bible into the believers' hands to interpret. The many schisms found among Protestants occurred as a consequence of individuals choosing to interpret matters of faith based on their own understanding of God's word. Whereas there is only one Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism includes Baptist, Methodist, Reformed, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and many other denominational and nondenominational



churches. These contrasting contexts shaped the degree to which individuals felt integrated into the religious community, leading Durkheim to predict that Protestants would be more likely to commit suicide than Catholics.

TESTING SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

In order to test his theory, Durkhiem gathered data from different countries to see if suicide rates varied. Looking at France, England, and Denmark, he found that whereas England had only 67 reported suicides per million inhabitants, France had 135 per million and Denmark had 277 per million. The question then became: "Why did Denmark have a comparatively high rate of reported suicide?" Durkheim concluded that it was due to the fact that Denmark was a more Protestant nation than either France or England. In other words, it was the social makeup of these nations that shaped their suicide rates. More recent research focusing on individuals rather than national rates continues to find this same relationship.

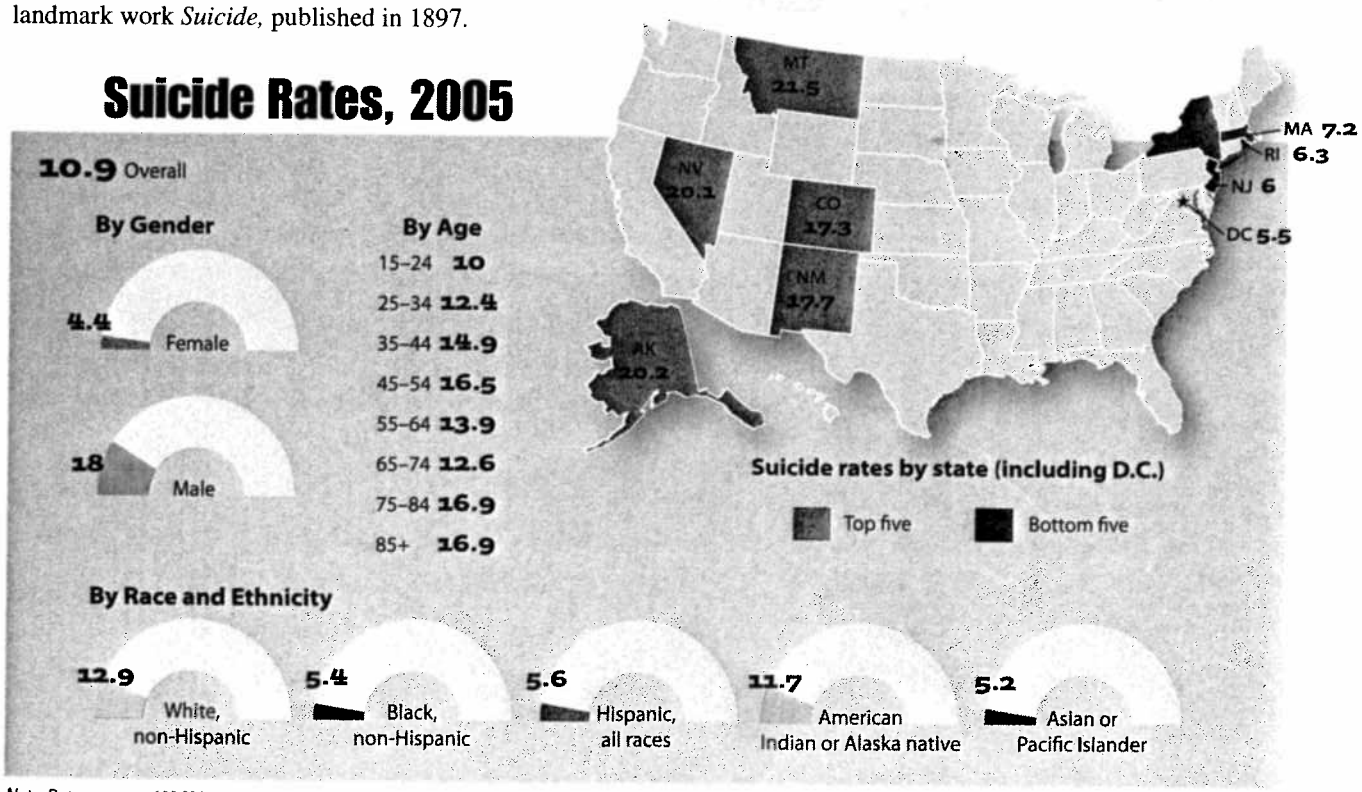
In extending his analysis to look at other indicators of social integration, Durkheim continued to obtain results that confirmed his underlying theory: the unmarried had much higher rates of suicide than married people; and soldiers were more likely to take their lives than civilians. In addition, there seemed to be higher rates of suicide in times of peace than in times of war and revolution, as well as higher rates in times of economic instability and recession rather than in times of prosperity. Durkheim concluded that the suicide rates of a society reflects the extent to which people are or are not integrated into the group life of the society. Durkheim presented his results in his landmark work *Suicide,* published in 1897.

APPLYING SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Built into Durkheim's theory is the presupposition that we find meaning in life through our interconnections with others. The more interconnected and interdependent we feel, the less likely we are to kill ourselves. Attempting to summarize the significance of our attachment to society, Durkheim put it this way: "The individual alone is not a sufficient end for his activity. He is too little. . . . When, therefore, we have no other object than ourselves we cannot avoid the thought that our efforts will finally end in nothingness. . . . Under these conditions one would lose the courage to live, that is, to act and struggle" ([1897]

SOCthink

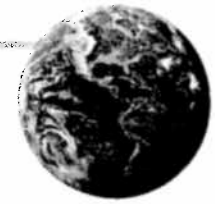
> > > If Durkheim is correct and level of social integration influences the likelihood of suicide, why do rates vary for the groups listed in the Suicide Rates figure? Why is the rate for men four times higher than that for women? Why is the rate for non-Hispanic Whites higher than that for any other racial/ethnic groups? Why do White, non-Hispanic males have the highest suicide rate of all? Why is the rate for the elderly highest of all age groups? Why is there a midlife suicide peak? What might the top-five or bottom-five states have in common? What might these patterns suggest about the social integration of people in these categories?



Note: Rates are per 100,000, not percentage.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics 2007; Kung, Hoyert, Xu, and Murphy 2008.

Going GLOBAL



What Makes a Country Happy?

Looking on the bright side of life, happiness rates also vary from country to country. The five nations that score highest on the Happiness Index are Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Iceland, and Finland. The bottom five are Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia. The United States ranks 17th out of 95 nations. Researcher Stefan Klein (2006) suggests that societies that are characterized by a strong sense of social solidarity, active civic engagement, a commitment to social equality, and sufficient individual autonomy tend to be happier.

1951:210). Human beings are, at their very foundation, social beings. According to Durkheim, we cannot consider what it means to be an individual apart from our position in society. This social dimension of individual behavior is what Durkheim wants sociology to explore, elaborate, and explain.

Durkheim's work on suicide provides a classic case of sociological theory at work. He theorized that social forces shape individual actions. He tested this theory by investigating suicide as one such individual choice—perhaps the most individual of all choices—and demonstrated that the likelihood of committing suicide varied based on group membership. Analysis of more recent data (see figure on page 9) shows that suicide rates continue to vary based on social position. Durkheim maintained that if social forces are at work in such an extreme example of individual choice, probably most of our choices are similarly shaped. He argued that if social forces have such power in our lives, there must be a discipline dedicated to their study. As a result, Durkheim established Europe's first department of sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1895.

>> The Development of Sociology

Given the complexity of human life, not surprisingly, sociologists have developed a wide range of theories in which they describe and explain the diversity of social behavior. Sometimes their theories can be grand in scope, seeking to encompass the "big picture"; other times they can be more personal, intimate, and immediate. While we will spend most of the rest of this book investigating the insights sociological theories provide, here we will briefly address just five questions sociologists have asked because they represent significant doors sociologists have opened as they have enlarged on what is meant by the sociological perspective. The questions are these: How is social





order maintained? How do power and inequality shape outcomes? How do we construct our worlds and ourselves through everyday interaction? How does group membership (especially class, race, and gender) shape opportunity? What responsibility do sociologists bear to bring about positive social change?

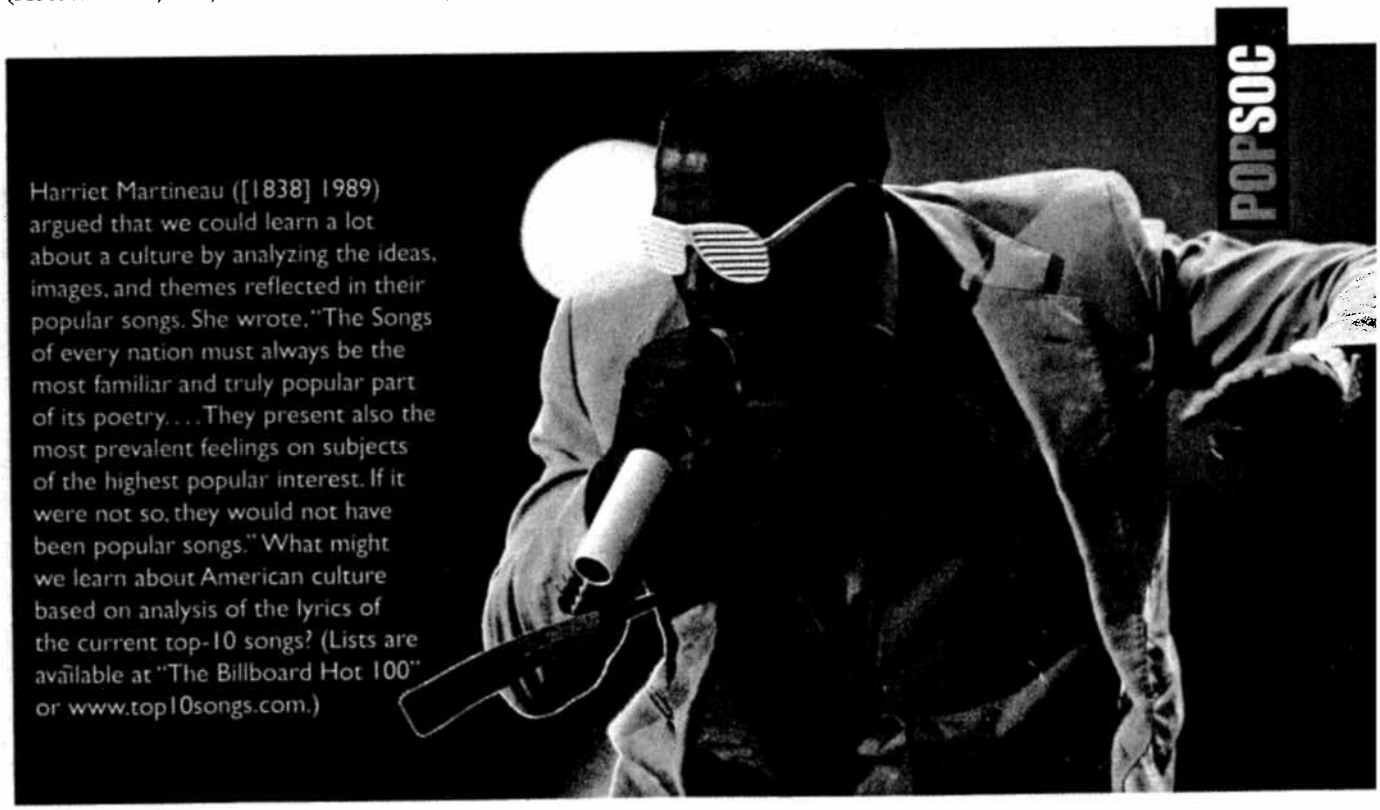
SOCIAL ORDER

The discipline of sociology grew up in the midst of significant social upheaval. The advent of the Industrial Revolution and urbanization in the early 19th century led to changes in patterns of government, thought, work, and everyday life. Aristocracy was on the decline while democracy was spreading; people were moving from a primary reliance on religious explanations to more scientific ones; and the world of the village and farm was rapidly giving way to the world of the city and factory. It was in this context that Auguste Comte (1798–1857), in hopes of emulating what natural scientists did for nature, sought to establish a science of society that would reveal the basic "laws of society." Comte believed that knowing these laws would help us to understand what he referred to as "social statics"—the principles by which societies hold together and order is maintained—and social dynamics—the factors that bring about change and that shape the nature and direction of that change. Sociologists would then use their knowledge of these laws to help lead us toward the good society, balancing the needs for social order and positive social change. Comte coined the term *sociology*—which literally means "the study of the processes of companionship"—to describe this new science (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 2000:333).

Scholars learned of Comte's works largely through translations by the English sociologist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). Seeking to systematize the research essential to conducting a science of society, Martineau ([1838] 1989) wrote the first book on sociological methods. But she was a pathbreaking theorist in her own right, introducing the significance of inequality and power into the discipline. Martineau's book *Society in America* ([1837] 1962) examined religion, politics, child rearing, and immigration in the young nation. It gave special attention to social class distinctions and to such factors as gender and race. In Martineau's ([1837] 1962) view, intellectuals and scholars should not simply offer observations of social conditions; they should act on their convictions in a manner that will benefit society. She spoke out in favor of the rights of women, the emancipation of slaves, and religious tolerance.

These two themes—analysis of social order and analysis of social inequality—have shaped the theoretical paths sociologists have pursued since this beginning. In early sociological theory, they find their fullest development in the works of Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx, respectively. As we will see throughout this book, they continue to be primary concerns for sociologists.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) emphasized the significance of social order. As we saw in his analysis of suicide, he saw society as a real, external force existing above the level of the individual and exerting its influence on individual behavior. Durkheim was particularly concerned about what happens when the power of society declines, resulting in weakened social integration. He theorized that an increase in the division of labor, a defining characteristic of modern societies, meant that individuals shared



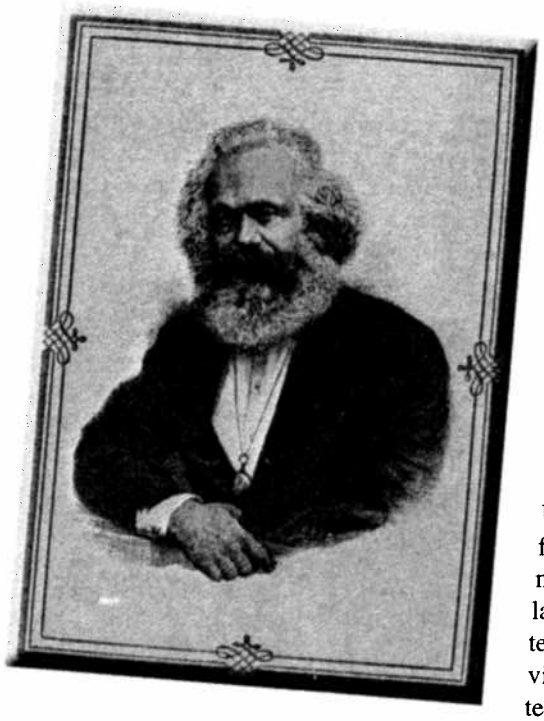
fewer common experiences, ideas, and values. As workers became much more specialized in their tasks, they were at greater risk of what Durkheim called **anomie**—the loss of direction felt in a society when social control of individual behavior has become ineffective. Anomie increases the likelihood of alienation, loneliness, and isolation. Inspired by Comte's vision, Durkheim sought to establish sociology as a science to study these processes.



Émile Durkheim

POWER AND INEQUALITY

While Karl Marx (1818–1883), like all sociologists, was concerned about social order and integration, his work emphasized the significance of power and control over resources. Marx viewed our creative capacity to transform raw materials into products—for example, to take clay and make a pot, or a tree and make a desk—as the key factor distinguishing humans from other animals (whose behavior is ruled by their instincts). For Marx, human history is the progressive unfolding of human creativity in the form of new technology through which we establish our relationship to the natural world and with each other. Unfortunately, for most of human history, we lacked sufficient technology to provide enough material goods (such as food, clothes, and shelter) to meet everyone's needs, so not all people had enough.



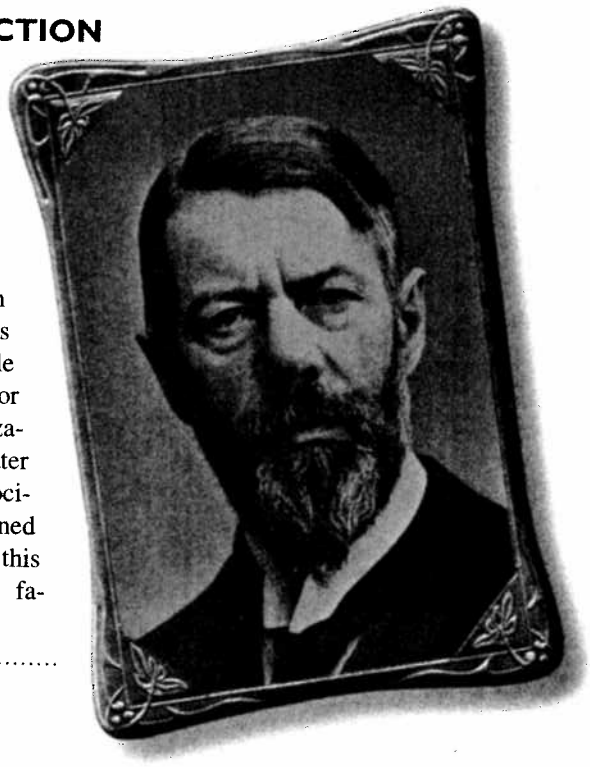
Karl Marx

Social inequality for Marx, then, is determined by ownership, or lack thereof, of key material resources. Those who own and control the means of production—the tools and resources necessary for that transformation to happen—rule the world. Members of the working class, in contrast, own only their capacity to transform raw materials into products, something they cannot do absent access to the means of production, which is controlled by the ruling class. While Durkheim was concerned with anomie, Marx was concerned with alienation, by which he meant loss of control over our creative human capacity to produce, separation from the products we make, and isolation from our fellow workers. We will consider Marx's work as it relates to capitalism in more detail in a later chapter. His influence on sociological theory, however, extends beyond social class to an analysis of group identification and association, such as how class, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and age influence individual opportunity.

Seeking to expand sociological theory further, Max Weber (1864–1920; pronounced "VAY-ber") offered a more general theory of power that was less wedded to capitalism and ownership of the means of production. Weber argued that, although social class and its associated control over material resources may determine who has power in most instances, these are not the only possible foundations for power. Others he identified include social status, in which people defer to others out of respect for their social position or prestige, and organizational resources, in which members of a group gain power through their ability to organize to accomplish some specific goal by maximizing their available resources. Weber argued that these social resources draw their power from people's willingness to obey the authority of another person, which in turn is based on their perception of the legitimacy of that person's right to rule.

INTERACTION

Much of the work of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber involves **macrosociology,** which concentrates on large-scale phenomena or entire civilizations. A later school of sociologists turned away from this approach in fa-

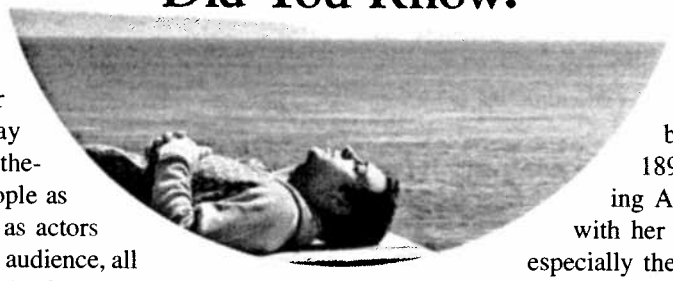


Max Weber

vor of **microsociology,** which stresses the study of small groups and the analysis of our everyday experiences and interactions. Microsociology emphasizes the significance of perception, of how we see others and how they see us. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) popularized a method known as the *dramaturgical approach* (see Chapter 4), which compares everyday life to the setting of the theater and stage and sees people as theatrical performers. Just as actors project certain images to an audience, all of us seek to present particular features of our personalities to others even as we hide certain qualities. Thus, in a class, we may feel the need to project a serious image; at a party, we want to look relaxed and friendly. In this approach, sociologists must analyze our lived experience at the everyday level where our actions create, sustain, and modify our understanding of reality itself.

. . . According to the Thomas theorem, established by sociologists W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928:571–572). In other words, our perceptions of what is real determine how we act more so than does reality itself.

Did You Know?



GROUPS AND OPPORTUNITY

Over time, sociologists came to more fully understand and appreciate the consequences that group membership, especially class, race, and gender, has for opportunity. Black sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963; pronounced "dew BOYS") combined an emphasis on the analysis of the everyday lived experience with a commitment to investigating power and inequality based on race. He was critical of those who relied on common sense or on all-too-brief investigations, arguing that a researcher has to be more than just a "car-window sociologist" because true understanding demands more than "the few leisure hours of a holiday trip to unravel the snarl of centuries" (Du Bois [1903] 1994:94). Through engaged and sustained research on the lives of African Americans, he documented their relatively low status in Philadelphia and Atlanta. Through this research he revealed the social processes that contributed to the maintenance of racial separation, which extended beyond material differences to include social separation, which he referred to as the "color line."

Similarly, feminist scholarship has broadened our understanding of social behavior by extending the analysis beyond the male point of view that dominated classic sociology. An early example of this perspective can be seen in the life and writings of Ida Wells-Barnett (1862–1931). Carrying on a tradition begun with Martineau, Wells-Barnett argued that societies can be judged based on whether the principles they claim to believe in match their actions. Wells-Barnett found that when it came to the principles of equality and opportunity for women and African Americans, America came up short. Part of the task for the sociologist, then, is to bring to light such inconsistencies that may otherwise go largely unnoticed. This is something Wells-Barnett sought to do in her groundbreaking publications in the 1890s on the practice of lynching African Americans, as well as with her advocacy of women's rights, especially the struggle to win the vote for women. Like feminist theorists who succeeded her, Wells-Barnett used her analysis of society as a means of resisting oppression. In her case, she researched what it meant to be African American, a woman in the United States, and a Black woman in the United States (Wells-Barnett 1970).

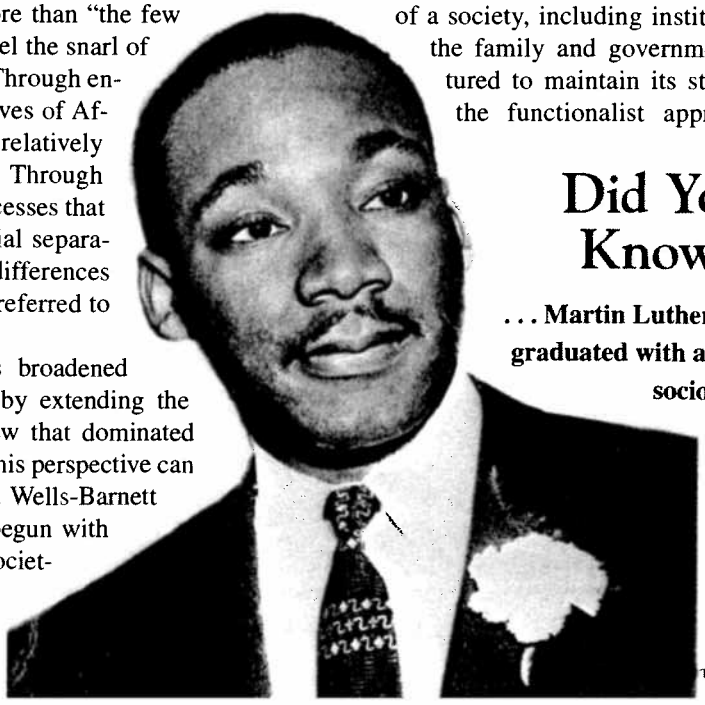
Sociologists categorize and describe the above sociological insights by dividing them into three approaches: functionalist, conflict, and interactionist. Durkheim's work is considered an example of the **functionalist perspective,** which views society as akin to a living organism in which each part of the organism contributes to its survival. The various parts of a society, including institutions such as the family and government, are structured to maintain its stability. Where the functionalist approach focuses

anomie The loss of direction felt in a society when social control of individual behavior has become ineffective.

macrosociology Sociological investigation that concentrates on large-scale phenomena or entire civilizations.

microsociology Sociological investigation that stresses the study of small groups and the analysis of our everyday experiences and interactions.

functionalist perspective A sociological approach that emphasizes the way in which the parts of a society are structured to maintain its stability.



Did You Know?

. . . Martin Luther King, Jr., graduated with a B.A. in sociology from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1948.

more on stability and consensus, the **conflict perspective** emphasizes the distribution of power and the allocation of resources in society. According to the conflict perspective, social order cannot be fully understood apart from a consideration of how the status quo is established and maintained and who benefits and who suffers from the existing system. Marx's work fits best within the conflict perspective. Finally, whereas functionalist and conflict theorists both analyze large-scale, society-wide patterns of behavior, theorists such as Goffman who take the **interactionist perspective** generalize about everyday forms of social interaction in order to explain society as a whole.

Three Perspectives on Sports

Functionalist: Social Order

- Sports socialize young people into such values as competition and patriotism.
- Sports bring together members of a community (supporting local athletes and teams) or even a nation (as seen during World Cup soccer matches and the Olympics) and promote an overall feeling of unity and social solidarity.

Conflict: Inequality & Power

- Sports are a form of big business in which profits are more important than the health and safety of the workers (athletes).
- Sports serve as an "opiate" that encourages people to seek a "fix" or temporary "high" rather than focus on personal problems and social issues.

Interactionist: Perception & Interaction

- Despite class, racial, and religious differences, teammates may work together harmoniously and may even abandon previous stereotypes and prejudices.
- Relationships in the sports world are defined by people's social positions as players, coaches, and referees—as well as by the high or low status that individuals hold as a result of their performances and reputations.



SOCthink

> > > Sometimes it seems like we are experiencing "credential inflation," with more and more education needed to get decent entry-level jobs. Why do you think this has happened? How might looking at the issue from the functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives shape how we frame an answer?

The three-perspectives model has the advantage of providing us with conceptual hooks that allow us to recall some of the key concerns and issues sociologists have raised. A key disadvantage, however, is that it gives the illusion that these three are discrete categories with fundamentally different and incompatible ways of looking at the world. In practice, research rooted in one perspective almost inevitably should draw on or address insights from the other two.

PURSUING SOCIAL CHANGE

Throughout sociology's history, a recurring theme common to all perspectives has been the idea that sociological theory and research should contribute to positive social change. In the early 1900s, many leading sociologists in the United States saw themselves as social reformers dedicated to systematically studying and then improving a corrupt society. They were genuinely concerned about the lives of immigrants in the nation's growing cities, whether those immigrants came from Europe or from the rural American South. Early female sociologists, in particular, often took active roles in poor urban areas as leaders of community centers known as settlement houses. For example, Jane Addams (1860–1935), an early member of the American Sociological Society, cofounded the famous Chicago settlement, Hull House. Addams and other pioneering female sociologists commonly combined intellectual inquiry, social service work, and political activism—all with the goal of assisting the underprivileged and creating a more egalitarian society. Working with Ida Wells-Barnett, Addams successfully prevented racial segregation in the Chicago public schools, and her efforts to establish a juvenile court system and a women's trade union reflect the practical focus of her work (Addams 1910, 1930; Deegan 1991; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998).

Sources: Acosta and Carpenter 2001; H. Edwards 1973; Eitzen 2003; Fine 1987.

HOOKED ON SOCIOLOGY

From Me to You



Taking an introductory sociology course can be a bit overwhelming. There are so many terms, concepts, facts, and figures that it can be difficult to make sense of it all. After I finished taking "Intro Soc" I felt a bit bewildered, but by then I knew there was something really interesting in the midst of it all. I took another course and was hooked. I encourage you to watch for and make note of things in the text that pique your interest and to recognize that any particular topic is but the tip of the iceberg built upon much more in-depth coverage and analysis to which sociologists have dedicated their lives. Consider following up on those interests later by tracking down some of those sources or taking a follow-up course.

This commitment to positive social change was not unique to Addams and her colleagues. From the very beginning and on down to the present, sociologists have recognized an obligation to go beyond explaining how the world works and become actively engaged in making the world a better place. In the words of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, "I have come to believe that those who have the good fortune to be able to devote their lives to the study of the social world cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of that world is at stake" (1998a:11). For some this has meant releasing the results of their research to the public so that we might make more informed decisions; for others it has meant active engagement in establishing social policy or assisting in the lives of others. For example, Durkheim, who considered an educated citizenry essential to democratic success, used his appointment to the Department of Science of Education and Sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris, along with his political connections and appointments, to shape French educational policy and practice. Du Bois cofounded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, better known as the NAACP. In fact, one of the dominant reasons students choose to major in sociology is because they want to make a difference, and sociology provides a pathway to do just that.



Jane Addams

conflict perspective A sociological approach that assumes that social behavior is best understood in terms of tension between groups over power or the allocation of resources, including housing, money, access to services, and political representation.

interactionist perspective A sociological approach that generalizes about everyday forms of social interaction in order to explain society as a whole.

applied sociology The use of the discipline of sociology with the specific intent of yielding practical applications for human behavior and organizations.

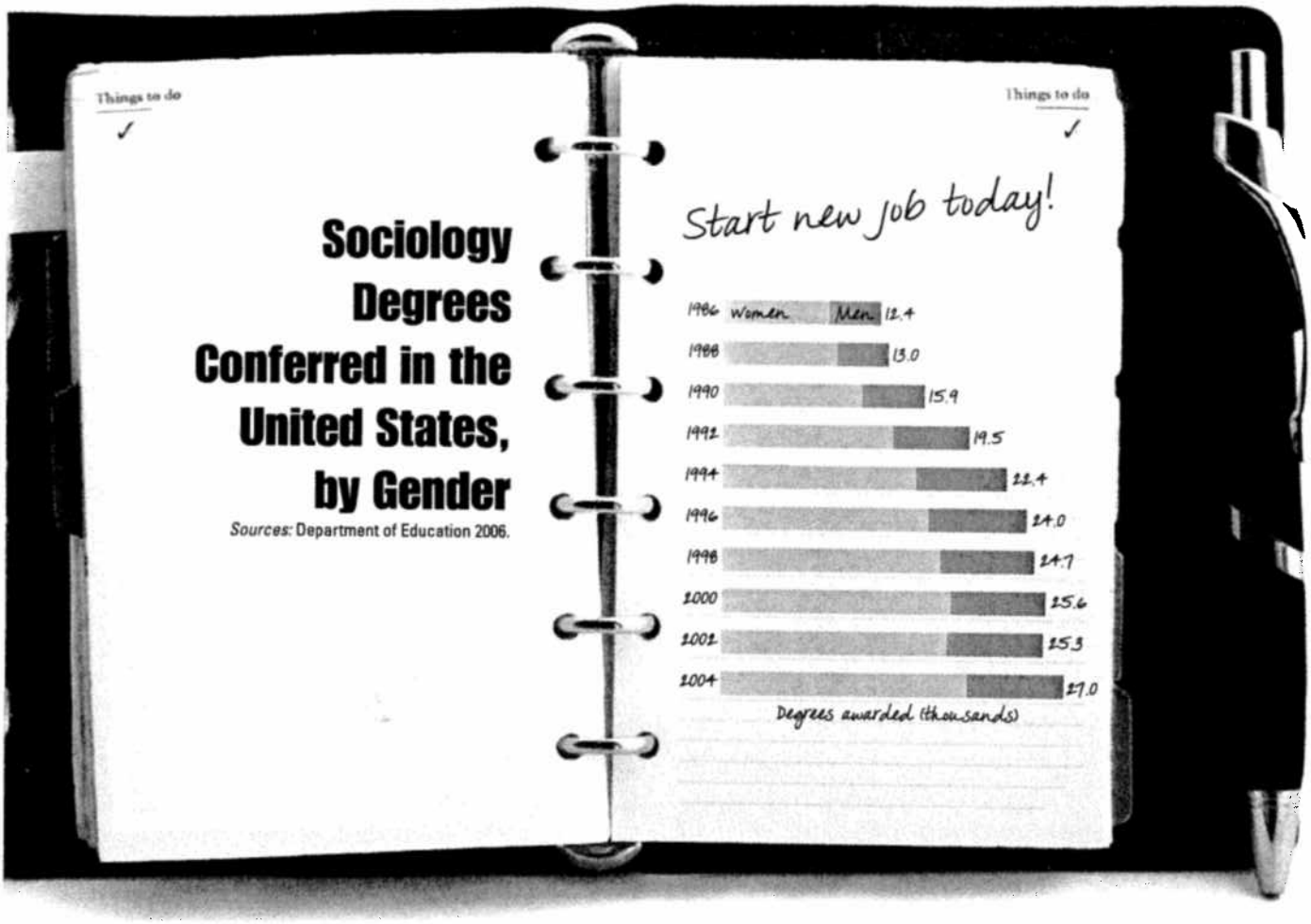
>> Practicing Sociology

For those who would like to pursue a career in sociology, a variety of paths are available. In recent decades, the number of U.S. college students who have graduated with a degree in sociology has risen steadily (see figure on page 16). While few occupations specifically require an undergraduate degree in sociology, sociological skills such as the ability to observe, interpret, and report on both macro- and micropatterns; to analyze and interpret data; and to work to bring about positive change are important assets in a wide range of occupations. Employment options for sociology majors include entry-level positions in business, social services, community organizations, not-for-profit groups, law enforcement, and more. The figure on page 16 summarizes the sources of employment for those with B.A. or B.S. degrees in sociology. One way to investigate a possible future in sociology is through an internship. Studies show that students who choose an internship have less trouble finding jobs, obtain better jobs, and enjoy greater job satisfaction than students without internship placements (American Sociological Association 2006a; Salem and Grabarek 1986).



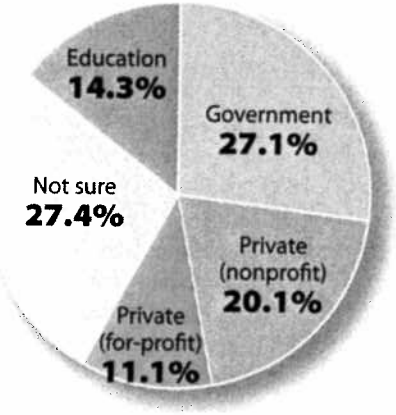
APPLIED SOCIOLOGY

Applied sociology is the use of the discipline of sociology with the specific intent of yielding practical



Sociology Degrees Conferred in the United States, by Gender

Sources: Department of Education 2006.



applications for human behavior and organizations. Often, the goal of such work is to assist in resolving a social problem. For example, in the past 40 years, eight presidents of the United States have established commissions to delve into major societal concerns facing our nation. Sociologists are often asked to apply their expertise to studying such issues as violence, pornography, crime, immigration, and population. In Europe both academic and governmental research departments are offering increasing financial support for applied studies.

One example of applied sociology involves the growing interest in the ways in which nationally recognized social problems manifest themselves locally. Since 2003, sociologist Greg Scott and his colleagues have been seeking to better understand the connection between illicit drug use and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The study, which will run through 2009, has so far employed 14 researchers from colleges and public health agencies, assisted by 15 graduate and 16 undergraduate students. By combining a variety of methods, including interviews and observation, with photo



Preferred Employment Sector of Graduating Sociology Majors

Note: Based on spring 2005 national survey of 1248 college seniors majoring in sociology.

Source: Adapted from American Sociological Association 2006:29.



and video documentation, these researchers have found that across all drug users, HIV/AIDS transmission is highest among users of crystal methamphetamine. Meth users are also most likely to engage in risky sexual behavior and to have partners who do so. Fortunately, of all drug users, meth users are the ones most closely connected to treatment programs, which allows them to receive substance abuse education and treatment from their health care providers. However, their cases, brought to the forefront by Scott and his team, highlight the need for public health officials to identify other individuals who engage in high-risk sexual behavior and to get them into appropriate treatment programs (G. Scott 2005).

Growing interest in applied sociology has led to such specializations as medical sociology and environmental sociology. The former includes research on how health care professionals and patients deal with disease. For example, medical sociologists have studied the social impact of the AIDS crisis on families, friends, and communities. Environmental sociologists examine the relationship between human societies and the physical environment. One focus of their work is the issue of "environmental justice," raised when researchers and community activists found that hazardous waste dumps are especially likely to be situated in poor and minority neighborhoods (M. Martin 1996).

CLINICAL SOCIOLOGY

The growing popularity of applied sociology has led to the rise of the specialty of clinical sociology. While applied sociology may involve simply evaluating social issues, **clinical sociology** is dedicated to facilitating change by altering social relationships (as in family therapy) or restructuring social institutions (as in the reorganization of a medical center). Louis Wirth (1931) wrote about clinical sociology more than 75 years ago, but the term itself has become popular only in recent years. The Association for Applied Clinical Sociology was founded in 1978 to promote the application of sociological knowledge in interventions for individual and social change. This professional group has developed a procedure for certifying clinical sociologists—much as physical therapists or psychologists are certified.

Applied sociologists generally leave it to others to act on their evaluations. By contrast, clinical sociologists take direct responsibility for implementation and view those with whom they work as their clients. This specialty has become increasingly attractive to graduate students in sociology because it offers an opportunity to apply intellectual learning in practical ways. A shrinking job market in the academic world has made such alternative career routes appealing.

clinical sociology The use of the discipline of sociology with the specific intent of altering social relationships or restructuring social institutions.

globalization The worldwide integration of government policies, cultures, social movements, and financial markets through trade and the exchange of ideas.

For sociology graduates interested in academic careers, the road to a Ph.D. (or doctorate) can be long and difficult. This degree symbolizes competence in original research; each candidate must prepare a book-length study known as a dissertation. Typically, a doctoral student in sociology will engage in four to seven years of intensive work, including the time required to complete the dissertation. Yet even this effort is no guarantee of a job as a sociology professor.

Most people who take an introductory course in sociology will never take another sociology course, so what does sociology have to offer them? Practicing sociology is about so much more than a career; it is a way of looking at the world around us and understanding its complexity and interconnections in a new way. It is about understanding others from their perspective and even understanding ourselves through their eyes. It is a way of assessing the accuracy of claims and refining our knowledge about why we think the way we think and act the way we act. Sociology is something you do; it's a way of life. Sociology is a verb.



>> Developing a Sociological Imagination

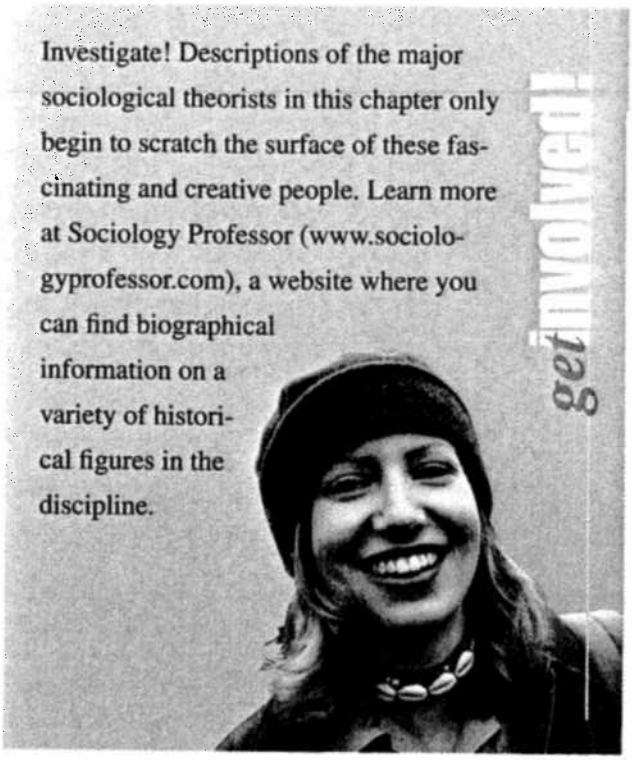
Learning to apply the sociological imagination may be more important now than ever. Through **globalization**—the worldwide integration of government policies, cultures, social movements, and financial markets through trade and the exchange of ideas—our lives are more connected with and dependent upon diverse groups of people around the world whose beliefs and practices may be quite different from our own. University campuses often provide a microcosm of this trend, drawing together people from around

the world with radically different values, political views, customs, and more into a relatively confined social space and providing opportunities for them to interact. If such interactions are to be meaningful, positive, and respectful, we must learn to use the sociological imagination to better understand ourselves and our culture.

SOCthink

> > > Consider the obstacles to cross-cultural interaction on college campuses. What function might such group homogeneity serve? How might it perpetuate inequality? Why might people be unwilling to interact with others who have different cultural practices?

Sociologists expect the next quarter century to be perhaps the most exciting and critical period in the history of the discipline. That is because of a growing recognition—both in the United States and around the world—that current social problems must be addressed before their magnitude overwhelms human societies. Sociologists plan to play an increasing role through theory, research, and action.



For REVIEW

I. What is sociology?
- Sociology is a way of seeing that joins theory and research to investigate the relationship between the individual and society and the impact unequal distribution of resources has on opportunity.

II. How do sociologists look at the world?
- Sociologists develop theories that provide windows into our lives, allowing us to better understand social order, inequality, and interaction.

III. How might someone practice sociology?
- Sociology can provide a pathway to a career in a related applied, clinical, or academic context. But more than that, we can practice sociology in our everyday lives by utilizing the sociological imagination to better understand ourselves and others.