Is sociology just common sense? Why would anyone want to study relationships with friends and family, how groups work, and where societies fit into the global system? What can we learn from scientifically studying our everyday lives? What exactly does it mean to see the world sociologically? Can sociology make our lives any better as the study of biology or chemistry does through new medications?

Those are some of the questions we hope to answer as we take a trip to a deeper level of understanding of ourselves and our social world. The first chapter of this book helps answer two questions: What is sociology, and why study it? Like your sociology professor, this book will argue that sociology is valuable because it gives us new perspectives on our personal and professional lives and because sociological insights and skills can help all of us make the world a better place.

The second chapter addresses how sociology began and how sociologists know what they know. When sociologists make a statement about the social world, how do they know it is true? What perspective or lens might sociologists employ to make sense of their information? For example, when sociologists find that education does not treat all children equally, what can be done about it? What evidence would be considered reliable, valid, dependable, and persuasive to support this statement? As we study sociology, we consider how we interact with each other; why we join groups and organizations; why some people are richer than others; why some people commit crimes; how race, class, and gender influence our positions in the social world; the major parts of society; and many other aspects of our social world.

By the time you finish reading the first two chapters, you should have an initial sense of what sociology is, how it can help you understand your social world, why the field is worth taking your time to explore, and how sociologists know what they know. We invite you to take a seat and come on a trip through the fascinating field of sociology and our social world.
Sociology involves a transformation in the way one sees the world—learning to recognize the complex connections of our intimate personal lives with large organizations and institutions and with national and global structures and events.
This model expresses a core idea carried throughout the book—the way in which your own life is embedded in, is shaped by, and influences your family, community, society, and world. It is a critically important reality that can make you a more effective person and a more knowledgeable citizen.
At 16, Zac Sunderland was the youngest person ever to sail solo around the world. During his 13 months at sea, he faced pirates; a broken boom, tiller, forestay, rigging, and bulkhead; and was almost washed overboard off Grenada. His adventure took him across three oceans, five seas, the equator, and 25,000 miles—alone! To quote his father, “He left thinking he knew a lot about life, and the difference now is, he does.” Another adventurer, determined to set a record by sailing across the Atlantic in a tiny, one-person craft powered only by the wind, knew he would be out of contact with other people for the duration of the voyage. He departed from the east coast of the United States, and for 2 months, he sailed in solitude. Although some feared that he was lost at sea, fortune was with him. His craft was spotted off the Irish coast—his destination. As he sailed into port, the media had been alerted to his arrival and awaited him. When the man disembarked to end this remarkable and sometimes painfully lonely journey, a reporter asked him what he had learned on his solitary voyage. The intrepid sailor thought for a moment and calmly replied, “I learned a lot about people” (“California Teen Youngest” 2009; Thomas 2009).

By being so totally alone for so long, these two intrepid sailors learned how completely social we humans really are. When alone, they spent much of their time reflecting on people and learned how painful and disorienting it can be to live without human contact. In short, their experiences taught them a basic sociological insight: Humans are fundamentally social beings.

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

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

Following the events of 9/11, the United States launched its highly publicized War on Terror, and many terrorist strongholds and training camps became targets for destruction. Still, troubling questions remain unanswered. Why did this extremist act occur? How can such actions be deterred in the future? How do the survivors recover from such a horrific event? Why was this event so completely disorienting to Americans and to the world community? Such terrorist acts horrify people because they are unpredicted and unexpected in a normally predictable world. They violate the rules that

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**Think About It**

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foster our connections to one another. They also bring attention to the discontent and disconnectedness that lie under the surface in many societies—discontent that expressed itself in hateful violence. Such discontent and hostility are likely to continue until the root causes are addressed.

Terrorist acts represent a rejection of modern civil society (Smith 1994). The terrorists themselves see their acts as justifiable, one way they can strike out against injustices and threats to their way of life—but more on that later. Few outside the terrorists’ inner circle understand their thinking and behavior. When terrorist acts occur, we struggle to fit such events into our mental picture of a just, safe, comfortable, and predictable social world. The events of 9/11 forced U.S. citizens to realize that although they may see a great diversity among themselves, people in other parts of the world view them as all the same. U.S. citizens are despised by some for what they represent. In other words, terrorists view U.S. citizens as intimately connected. For many U.S. citizens, their sense of loyalty to the nation was deeply stirred by the events of 9/11. Patriotism abounded. So, in fact, the nation’s people became more connected as a reaction to an act against the United States.

Most of the time, we live with social patterns that we take for granted as routine, ordinary, and expected. These social patterns are essential in social groups. Unlike our motivations or drives, social expectations come from those around us and guide (or constrain) our behaviors and thoughts. Without shared expectations between humans about proper patterns of behavior, life would be chaotic. Our social interactions require some basic rules, and these rules create routine and safe normalcy in everyday interaction. It would be strange if someone broke the expected patterns. For the people in and around the World Trade Center on 9/11, the social rules governing everyday life broke down that awful day. How could anyone live in society if there were no rules, and can a society exist without rules?

This chapter examines the social ties that make up our social world, as well as sociology’s focus on those ties. We will learn what sociology is and why it is valuable to study; how sociologists view the social world and what they do; how studying sociology can help us in our everyday life; and how the social world model is used to understand the social world and present the topics we will study throughout this book.
Understanding Our Social World: The Scientific Study of Society

What Is Sociology?

Whether we are in a coffee shop, classroom, or dining hall, at a party or in our residence hall, at work or at home, we interact with other people. Such interactions are the foundation of social life, and they are the subject of interest to sociologists. According to the American Sociological Association (2009), Sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies and how people interact within these contexts. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious traditions; from the divisions of race, gender, and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture. (p. 5)

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

Unlike the discipline of psychology, which focuses on the attributes, motivations, and behaviors of individuals, sociology tends to focus on group patterns. Whereas a psychologist might try to explain behavior by examining the personality traits of individuals, a sociologist would examine the positions of different people within the group and how these positions influence what people do. Sociologists seek to analyze and explain why people interact with others and belong to groups, how groups work, who has power and who does not, how decisions are made, and how groups deal with conflict and change. From the early beginnings of sociology (discussed in Chapter 2), sociologists have asked questions about the rules that govern group behavior; about the causes of social problems, such as child abuse, crime, or poverty; and about why nations declare war and kill each other’s citizens.

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

Thinking Sociologically

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

Underlying Ideas in Sociology

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

People are social by nature. This means that humans seek contact with other humans, interact with one another, and influence and are influenced by the behaviors of others. Furthermore, humans need groups to survive. Although a few individuals may become socially isolated as adults, they could not have reached adulthood without sustained interactions...
Chapter 1. Sociology: A Unique Way to View the World

with others. The central point here is that we become who we are because other people and groups constantly influence us.

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

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

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

The processes of conflict and change are natural and inevitable features of groups and societies. No group can remain stagnant and hope to perpetuate itself. To survive, groups must adapt to changes in the social and physical environment. Rapid change often comes at a price. It can lead to conflict within a society—between traditional and new ideas and between groups that have vested interests in particular ways of doing things. Rapid change can give rise to protest activities; changing in a controversial direction or failing to change fast enough can spark conflict, including revolution. The 2009 demonstrations following what some saw as a rigged election in Iran and the violence of citizens against what some saw as a corrupt election in Kenya in 2007–2008 illustrate the demand for change that can spring from citizens' discontent with corrupt or authoritarian rule.

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

Sociology Versus Common Sense

Human tragedy can result from inaccurate commonsense beliefs. For example, the Nazi genocide and the existence of slavery both have their roots in false beliefs about racial superiority. Consider for a moment some events that have captured media attention, and ask yourself questions about these events: Why do some families remain poor generation after generation? Are kids from certain kinds of neighborhoods more likely to get into trouble with the law than kids from other neighborhoods? Why do political, religious, and ethnic conflicts exist in the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, the Middle East, and the disputed areas of China, such as Tibet and Uyghurstan? Why do some families experience high levels of violence in the home? Why is the homicide rate in the United States so much higher than that of other developed nations? Our answers to such questions reflect our beliefs and assumptions about the social world. These assumptions often are based on our experiences, our judgments about what our friends and family believe, what we have read or viewed on television, and common stereotypes (rigid beliefs, often untested and unfounded) about a group or a category of people.

Common sense refers to ideas that are so completely taken for granted that they have never been seriously questioned and seem to be sensible to any reasonable person. We all use common sense, based on our personal experiences, to process information and decide how to act. Although all of us base decisions on common sense, that does not mean it is always accurate. The difference between common sense and sociology is that sociologists use scientific methods to
test the accuracy of commonsense beliefs and ideas about human behavior and the social world.

Would our commonsense notions about the social world be reinforced or rejected if examined with scientifically gathered information? Some commonsense notions (above) actually contradict each other, yet all guide behavior at some time.

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

The difference between common sense and sociology is that sociologists test their beliefs by gathering information and analyzing the evidence in a planned, objective, systematic, and replicable (repeatable) scientific way. Indeed, they set up studies to see if they can disprove what they think is true. This is the way science is done. Consider the following examples of commonsense beliefs about the social world and some research findings about these beliefs.

**Thinking Sociologically**

What are some other commonsense sayings that you know that contradict one another? Also, take a look at the commonsense quiz online at www.pineforge.com/ballantine3e. Do some of the answers surprise you? If so, why?

**Commonsense Beliefs and Social Science Findings**

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

**Belief: As developing countries modernize, the lives of their female citizens improve.** This is generally false.
Chapter 1. Sociology: A Unique Way to View the World

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

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

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

As these examples illustrate, many of our commonsense beliefs are challenged by social scientific evidence. On examination, the social world is often more complex than our commonsense understanding of events, which is based on limited evidence. Throughout history, there are examples of beliefs that seemed obvious at one time but have been shown to be mistaken through scientific study. The point is that the discipline of sociology provides a method to assess the accuracy of our commonsense assumptions about the social world.

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

Thinking Sociologically

What are some of your commonsense beliefs? How did you develop these beliefs, and what evidence do you have to support these beliefs?

The Sociological Imagination

Happenings in the social world affect our individual lives. If we are unemployed or lack funds for our college education, we may say this is a personal problem. Yet often, broader social issues are at the root of our situation. The sociological perspective holds that we can best understand our personal experiences and problems by examining their broader social context—by looking at the big picture.

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

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

Families also experience stress as partners have, over time, assumed increasing responsibility for their mate's and their children's emotional and physical needs. Until the second half of the 20th century, the community and the extended family unit—aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins—assumed more of that burden. Extended families continue to exist in countries where children settle near their parents, but in modern urban societies, both the sense of community and the connection to the extended family are greatly diminished. There are fewer intimate ties to call on for help and support. Divorce is a very personal condition for those affected, but it can be understood far more clearly when considered in conjunction with the broader social context of economics, urbanization, changing gender roles, lack of external support, and legislated family policies.

As we learn about sociology, we will come to understand how social forces shape individual lives, and this will help us understand aspects of everyday life we take for granted. In this book, we will investigate how group life will help us understand aspects of everyday life we take for granted. In this book, we will investigate how group life will help us understand aspects of everyday life we take for granted.

Thinking Sociologically

How does poverty, war, or an economic recession cause personal troubles for someone you know? Why is it inadequate to try to explain these personal troubles by examining only the personal characteristics of those affected?

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

Questions Sociologists Ask—and Don’t Ask

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

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

Consider the following examples of questions sociologists might ask:

- Who gets an abortion, why do they do so, and how does society as a whole view abortion? These are matters of fact that a social scientist can explore. However, sociologists avoid making ethical judgments about whether abortion is right or wrong. The question about the morality of abortion is very important to many people, but it is based on philosophical or theological rationale and values, not on scientific analysis.
- Who is the most beautiful? Cultural standards of beauty affect individual popularity and social interaction, an issue that interests some social scientists. However, the sociologist would not judge which individuals are more or less attractive. Such questions are matters of aesthetics, a field of philosophy and art.
- What are the circumstances around individuals becoming drunk and drunken behavior? This question is often tied more to the social environment than to
Today, Americans enjoy more rights, better working conditions, better living conditions, and more protection from disease in childhood and old age than anyone could have imagined 100 years ago . . . But that doesn’t let you off the hook! There are still many problems and much work to do. Like all agents for social change, . . . social reformers such as Martin Luther King Jr., a sociology major, understood the basic point of sociology, that is, to look for the connections between people’s everyday personal problems and the larger trends in society.

Things that we experience as personal matters—a woman facing domestic violence, or a low-wage worker who cannot afford housing, or middle-class people stuck in daily traffic jams—are really about how our institutions function. Sociologists hold a mirror up to our society and help us see our society objectively. One way to do this is by comparing our own society to others. This sometimes makes us uncomfortable—because we take so much about our society for granted. Conditions that we may consider “normal,” other societies may consider serious problems. For example, if we compare the United States to other advanced industrial countries such as Canada, Germany, France, Sweden, Australia, Holland, and Belgium, we find some troubling things:

- The United States has the highest per capita income among those countries. At the same time, the United States has, by far, the widest gap between the rich and the poor.
- Almost 30 percent of American workers work full-time, year-round, for poverty-level wages.
- The United States has the highest overall rate of poverty. More than 40 million Americans live in poverty.
- Over 13 million of these Americans are children. In fact, one out of six American children is poor. They live in slums and trailer parks, eat cold cereal for dinner, share a bed or a cot with their siblings, and sometimes with their parents, and are often one disaster away from becoming homeless . . .
- Only half to two-thirds of children eligible for the Head Start program are enrolled because of the lack of funding . . .
- The United States has the highest infant mortality rate among the major industrial nations . . .
- The United States is the only one of these nations without universal health insurance.

More than 50 million Americans have no health insurance.
- Americans spend more hours stuck in traffic jams than people of any of these other countries. This leads to more pollution, more auto accidents, and less time spent with families.
- Finally, the United States has a much higher proportion of our citizens in prison than any of these societies . . .

. . . What would you like your grandchildren to think about how you spent the 21st century? . . . No matter what career you pursue, you have choices about how you will live your lives. As citizens, you can sit on the sidelines and merely be involved in your society, or you can decide to become really committed to making this a better world.

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

So ask yourselves: What are some of the things that we take for granted today that need to be changed? What are some ideas for changing things that today might seem “outrageous,” but that—25 or 50 or 100 years from now—will be considered common sense? . . . A record number of college students today are involved in a wide variety of “community service” activities—such as mentoring young kids in school, volunteering in a homeless shelter, or working in an AIDS hospice. As a result of this student activism, more than 100 colleges and universities have adopted “anti-sweatshop” codes of conduct for the manufacturers of clothing that bear the names and logos of their institutions.

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

I know you will not be among those who simply “see things the way they are and ask: why?” Instead, you will “dream things that never were and ask: why not?” [George Bernard Shaw].
Sociologists learn techniques to avoid letting their values influence their research designs, data gathering, and analysis. Still, complete objectivity is difficult at best, and what one chooses to study may be influenced by one's interests and concerns about injustice in society. The fact that sociologists know they will be held accountable by other scientists for the objectivity of their research is a major factor in encouraging them to be objective when they do their research.

Thinking Sociologically

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

The Social Sciences: A Comparison

Not so long ago, our views of people and social relationships were based on stereotypes, intuition, superstitions, supernatural explanations, and traditions passed on from one generation to the next. Natural sciences first used the scientific method, a model later adopted by social sciences. Social scientists, including anthropologists, psychologists, economists, cultural geographers, historians, and political scientists, apply the scientific method to study social relationships, to correct misleading and harmful misconceptions about human behaviors, and to guide policy decisions.

Consider the following examples of specific studies various social scientists might conduct. This is followed by a brief description of the focus of sociology as a social science.

One anthropological study focused on garbage, studying what people discard to understand what kind of life they lead and foods they eat—their patterns of life. Anthropology is the study of humanity in its broadest context. It is closely related to sociology, and the two areas have common historical roots. There are four major subfields within anthropology: physical anthropology (which is related to biology), archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology (sometimes called ethnology). This last field has the most in common with sociology. Cultural anthropologists study the culture, or way of life, of a society.

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

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

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

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

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

Thinking Sociologically

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

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

Did you ever wonder why some families are close and others are estranged? Why some work groups are very productive while others are not? Why some people are rich and others remain impoverished? Why some people engage in criminal behaviors and others conform rigidly to rules? Sociologists have the perspective and methods to search for a deeper understanding than common sense can provide about human interaction.

Two ingredients are essential to the study of our social world: (1) a keen ability to observe what is happening in the social world and (2) a desire to find answers to the question of why it is happening. The value of sociology is that it affords us a unique perspective and provides the methods to study systematically important questions about human interaction, group behavior, and social structure. The practical significance of the sociological perspective is that it

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

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

**What Sociologists Do**

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

The amount of study completed in sociology plus the sociologists’ areas of specialization help determine the types of positions they hold. The three typical sociology degrees are bachelor of arts or bachelor of science (BA or BS), master of arts (MA), and doctorate (PhD).

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

Consider your professor. The duties of professors vary depending on the type of institution and the level of courses offered. Classroom time fills only a portion of a professor’s...
High schools are big organizations made up of smaller friendship networks and cliques; a careful examination can give us insight into the tensions that exist as the groups struggle for resources and power in the school.

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

Despite their animosity toward one another, the goal of both groups was to gain more autonomy from the adult authorities who constantly bossed students around. As the burnouts saw things, if the jocks would have even a slight bit of backbone and stand up for the dignity of students as adults, life would be better for everyone. The burnouts believed that school officials should earn their obedience. The burnouts maintained their dignity by affirming that they did not recognize bossy adults as authorities. Wearing coats all day was another way to emphasize the idea that “I’m just a visitor in this school.”

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

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

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

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

These studies show that sociological analysis can help us understand some of the ways in which connections between groups—regardless of whether they are in conflict or harmony—shape the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of people living in this complex social world.
working day. Other activities include preparing for classes, preparing and grading exams and assignments, advising students, serving on committees, keeping abreast of new research in the field, and conducting research studies and having them published. This last “publish or perish” activity is deemed the most important activity for faculty in some major universities.

In businesses, applied sociologists use their knowledge and research skills in human resources or to address organizational needs or problems. In government jobs, they provide data such as population projections for education and health care planning. In social service agencies, such as police departments, they help address deviant behavior, and in health agencies, they may be concerned with doctor-patient interactions. Applied sociology is an important aspect of the field; you will find featured inserts in some chapters discussing the work of an applied sociologist. These examples will provide a picture of what one can do with a sociology degree. In addition, at the end of some chapters you will find a section discussing policy examples and implications related to that chapter topic. Figure 1.2 provides some ideas of career paths for graduates with a degree in sociology.

Thinking Sociologically

From what you have read so far, how might social interaction skills and knowledge of how groups work be useful to you in your anticipated major and career?

What Employers Want and What Sociology Majors Bring to a Career

Sociologists and other social scientists have studied what job skills and competencies employers seek in new employees, in addition to subject matter expertise. Employers focus on writing, speaking, analytical skills—especially when faced with complex problems, understanding of other cultures and of the diversity within the United States, the ability to work effectively in diverse teams, and the ability to gather and interpret quantitative information. As

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<tr>
<th>Business or Management</th>
<th>Human Services</th>
<th>Education</th>
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<td>Market researcher</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales manager</td>
<td>Criminologist</td>
<td>Academic research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer relations</td>
<td>Gerontologist</td>
<td>Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manufacturing representative</td>
<td>Hospital administrator</td>
<td>School counselor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Banking or loan officer</td>
<td>Charities administrator</td>
<td>Policy analyst</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data processor</td>
<td>Community advocate or organizer</td>
<td>College professor</td>
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<td>Attorney</td>
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<th>Research</th>
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<td>Population analyst</td>
<td>Policy advisor or administrator</td>
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<td>Surveyor</td>
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<td>Market researcher</td>
<td>Legislator</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
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<td>Economic analyst</td>
<td>Census worker</td>
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<td>Public opinion pollster</td>
<td>International agency representative</td>
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**Figure 1.2 What Can You Do With a Sociology Degree?**

*Note:* Surveys of college alumni with undergraduate majors in sociology indicate that this field of study prepares people for a broad range of occupations, some of which require graduate or professional training. For further information, contact your department chair or the American Sociological Association in Washington, D.C., for a copy of *Careers in Sociology*, 2009.

Table 1.2 indicates, employers want more of these kinds of skills from college graduates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of human culture</th>
<th>72</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The role of the United States in the world</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural values and traditions—U.S. and global</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intellectual and practical skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teamwork skills in diverse groups</td>
<td>76</td>
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<td>Critical thinking and analytic reasoning</td>
<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written and oral communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information literacy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity and innovation</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complex problem solving</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative reasoning</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and social responsibility</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Intercultural competence (teamwork in diverse groups)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural knowledge (global issues)</td>
<td>72</td>
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</tbody>
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The following skills and competencies are part of most sociological training:

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

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

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

Thinking Sociologically

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

The Social World Model

Think about the different groups you depend on and interact with on a daily basis. You wake up to greet members of your family or your roommate. You go to a larger group—a class—that exists within an even larger organization—the college or university. Understanding sociology and the approach of this book requires a grasp of levels of analysis, that is social groups from the smallest to the largest. It may
be relatively easy to picture small groups, such as a family, a sports team, or a sorority or fraternity. It is more difficult to visualize large groups, such as corporations—The Gap, Abercrombie and Fitch, Eddie Bauer, General Motors Corporation, or Starbucks—or organizations such as local or state governments. The largest groups include nations or international organizations, such as the sprawling networks of the United Nations or the World Trade Organization. Groups of various sizes shape our lives. Sociological analysis requires that we understand these groups at various levels of analysis.

The social world model helps us picture the levels of analysis in our social surroundings as an interconnected series of small groups, organizations, institutions, and societies. Sometimes these groups are connected by mutual support and cooperation, but sometimes there are conflicts and power struggles over access to resources. What we are asking you to do here and throughout this book is to develop a sociological imagination—the basic lens used by sociologists. Picture the social world as a linked system made up of increasingly larger circles. To understand the units or parts of the social world model, look at the model shown here.
This social world model will be used throughout our book to illustrate how each topic fits into the big picture—our social world. No social unit of our social world can stand alone. All units affect each other, either because they serve the needs of other units in the system or because of the intense conflict and tension affecting different units. The social world is organized into two parts—social structures and social processes. Now, let us take a trip through our social world.

**Social Structures**

The social world model is made up of a number of parts that combine to form the *social structure*, like a framework that holds societies together. *Social units*, interconnected parts of the social world, range from interaction in dyads (two people) and small groups to large-scale actions such as negotiating between countries or wars between societies. All these social units combine into a larger social structure that brings order to our lives.

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

*Social institutions* are the largest units that make up every society—family, education, religion, politics, economics, science, sports, healthcare, and the military. They provide the rules, roles, and relationships to meet human needs and guide human behavior. They are the units through which organized social activities take place, and they provide the setting for activities essential to human and societal survival. For example, we cannot survive without an economic institution to provide guidelines and a structure for meeting our basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Likewise, we would never make it to adulthood as functioning members of society without the family, the most basic of all institutions.

Compare this with a picture of our body’s skeleton, which governs how our limbs are attached to the torso and how they move. Like the system of organs that make up our bodies—heart, lungs, kidneys, bladder—all social institutions are interrelated. Just as a change in one part of the body affects all others, a change in one institution affects the others. When governments pass laws providing money to schools for children’s lunches, requiring standardized testing, or limiting extracurricular activities due to lack of funds, it affects both families and schools. Likewise, if many people are unable to afford medical treatment, the society is less healthy, and there are consequences for families, schools, workplaces, and society as a whole.

The *national society*, one of the largest social units in our model, includes a population of people, usually living within a specified geographic area, who are connected by common ideas and are subject to a particular political authority. It also features a social structure with groups and institutions. Although a national society is one of the largest social units, it is still a subsystem of the interdependent global system. France, Kenya, Brazil, and Laos are all national societies on separate continents, but they are linked as part of the global system of nations. In addition to having relatively permanent geographic and political boundaries, a national society also has one or more languages and a way of life. In most cases, national societies involve countries or large regions where the inhabitants share a common identity as members. In certain other instances, such as contemporary Great Britain, a single national society may include several groups of people who consider themselves distinct from each other.
nationalities (Welsh, English, Scottish, and Irish within the United Kingdom). Such multicultural societies may or may not be harmonious.

Thinking Sociologically

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

Social Processes

Picture social processes as the actions taken by people in social units. Processes keep the social world working, much as the beating heart keeps the body working. For example, the process of socialization teaches individuals how to become productive members of society. It takes place through actions in families, educational systems, religious organizations, and other social units. Socialization is essential for the continuation of any society. Similarly, our social positions in society are the result of stratification, the process of layering people into social strata based on factors such as birth, income, occupation, and education. Conflict occurs between individuals or groups over money, jobs, and other needed resources. The process of change is also a continuous pattern in every social unit; change in one unit affects other units of the social world, often in a chain reaction. For instance, change in the quality of health care can affect the workforce; a beleaguered workforce can affect the economy; instability in the economy can affect families, as breadwinners lose jobs; and family economic woes can affect religious communities because devastated families cannot afford to give money to the churches, mosques, or temples.

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

The Environment

Surrounding each social unit, whether a small family group or a large corporation, is an environment. It includes everything that influences the social unit, such as its physical and organizational surroundings and technological innovations. Each unit has its own environment to which it must adjust, just as each individual has a unique social world, including family, friends, and other social units that make up our immediate environment. Some parts of the environment are more important to the social unit than others. Your local church, synagogue, temple, or mosque is located in a community environment. That religious organization may seem autonomous and independent, but it depends on its national organization for guidelines and support, the local police force to protect the building from vandalism, and the local economy to provide jobs to members so that the members, in turn, can support the organization. If the religious education program is going to train children to understand the scriptures, local schools are needed to teach the children to read. A religious group may also be affected by other religious bodies, competing with one another for potential members from the community. These religious groups may work cooperatively—organizing a summer program for children or jointly sponsoring a holy-day celebration—or they may define one another as evil, each trying to stigmatize the other. Moreover, one local religious group may be composed primarily of professional and business people and another group mostly of laboring people. The religious groups may experience conflict in part because they each serve a different socioeconomic constituency.

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

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

Studying the Social World: Levels of Analysis

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

Each of these social units—from the smallest (the individual student) to the largest (society and the global system)—is referred to as a level of analysis (see Table 1.3). These levels are illustrated in the social world model at the beginning of each chapter and relate to that chapter’s content as shown through examples in the model.

### MICRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

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

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

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

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

Meso-level analyses lead to quite different explanations for abuse.

### MESO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Analysis of intermediate-size social units, called meso-level analysis, involves looking at units smaller than the nation but larger than the local community or even the region. This level includes national institutions (such as the economy of a country, the national educational system, or the political system within a country), nationwide organizations (such as a political party, a soccer league, or a national women’s rights organization), nationwide corporations (such as Ford Motor Company or IBM), and ethnic groups that have an identity as a group (such as Jews, Mexican Americans, or Native Americans in the United States). Organizations, institutions, and ethnic communities are smaller than the nation or global social forces, but they are still beyond the everyday personal experience and control of individuals, unless those individuals organize to collectively change these structures. They are intermediate in the sense of being too large to know everyone in the group,
but they are not as large as nation-states at the macro level. For example, meso-level states in the United States, provinces in Canada, or prefectures in Japan are more accessible and easier to change than the national bureaucracies of these countries.

Using meso-level analysis to examine changes in women’s status, for example, could include study of women’s legal, educational, religious, economic, political, scientific, and sport-related opportunities in society. However, meso-level changes that create new opportunities for women may also cause conflicts and even abuse within individual families at the micro level as women take advantage of expanding opportunities outside the home (Newman and Grauerholz 2002).

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

**MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS**

Studying the largest social units in the social world, called macro-level analysis, involves looking at entire nations, global forces, and international social trends. Macro-level analysis is essential to our understanding of how larger social forces, such as global events, shape our everyday lives. A natural disaster such as the 2009 earthquake in Sumatra, the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia, the heat waves of the 2006 summer in Europe, the floods in the United States in the summer of 2008, or the frequent earthquakes around the world may change the foods we are able to serve at our family dinner table, since much of our food is now imported from other parts of the world. (Map 1.1 shows some of the most deadly natural disasters of the past few years.) Likewise, a political conflict on the other side of the planet can lead to war, which means that a member of your family may be called up on active duty and sent into harm’s way more than 7,000 miles from your home. Each member

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**Map 1.1 The Ten Most Deadly Natural Disasters From January 2001 to January 2010**

of the family may experience individual stress, have trouble concentrating, and feel ill with worry. The entire globe has become an interdependent social unit. If we are to prosper and thrive in the 21st century, we need to understand connections that go beyond our local communities.

Even patterns such as domestic violence, considered as micro- and meso-level issues above, can be examined at the macro level. A study of 95 societies around the world found that violence against women (especially rape) occurs at very different rates in different societies, with some societies being completely free of rape (Benderly 1982) and others having a “culture of rape.” The most consistent predictor of violence against women was a macho conception of masculine roles and personality. Societies that did not define masculinity in terms of dominance and control were virtually free of rape. Some sociologists believe that the same pattern holds for domestic violence: A society or subgroup within society that teaches males that the finest expression of their masculinity is physical strength and domination is very likely to have battered women (Burn 2005). The point is that understanding individual human behavior often requires investigation of the larger societal beliefs that support that behavior. Worldwide patterns may tell us something about a social problem and offer new lenses for understanding that problem. Try the “Engaging Sociology” on the following page to test your understanding of levels of analysis and the sociological imagination.

Thinking Sociologically

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

Distinctions between each level of analysis are not sharply delineated. The micro level shades into the meso level, and the lines between the meso level and the macro level are blurry. Still, it is clear that in some micro-level social units, you know everyone, or at least every member of the social unit is only 2 degrees of relatedness away. That is, every person in the social unit knows someone whom you also know. We all participate in meso-level social units that are smaller than the nation but that can be huge. Millions of people may belong to the same religious denomination or the same political party. We share connections with those people, and our lives are affected by people we do not even know. Consider the political activities in the United States and other countries that take place on the Internet. In political campaigns, millions of individuals join organizations such as Moveon.org and True Majority, participate in dialogues online, and contribute money to political organizations. People living thousands of miles from one another united financially and in spirit to support Obama-Biden or McCain-Palin in the 2008 U.S. election. Thus, the meso level is different from the micro level, but both influence us. The macro level is even more removed from the individual, but its impact can change our lives.

The social world model presented in the chapter opening illustrates the interplay of micro-, meso-, and macro-level forces, and Figure 1.3 illustrates that this micro-to-macro model should be seen as a continuum. In the “Sociology Around the World” on page 25, we examine a village in Tunisia to see how macro-level forces influence a meso-level local community and individual micro-level lives.
Engaging Sociology

**Micro-Meso-Macro**

Look at the list of various groups and other social units below. Identify which group would belong to in each level—(1) micro, (2) meso, or (3) macro. The definitions below should help you make your decisions. Answers are found online at www.pineforge.com/ballantine3e.

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

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

**Macro-level groups**: Large social units, usually quite bureaucratic, that operate at a national or a global level. Most members are unlikely to know or have communicated with the leaders personally or know someone who knows the leaders. The “business” of these groups is of international import and implication. Some research indicates that every person on the planet is within 7 degrees of relatedness to every other human being. A macro-level system is one in which most of the members are at least 5 degrees of relatedness from one another—that is, you know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows the person in question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Micro social units</th>
<th>2. Meso social units</th>
<th>3. Macro social units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your nuclear family</td>
<td>The United Nations</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United Nations</td>
<td>A local chapter of the Lions Club or the Rotary Club</td>
<td>The Republican Party in the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your high school baseball team</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>The World Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)</td>
<td>A fraternity at your college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First Baptist Church in Muncie, Indiana</td>
<td>The First Baptist Church in Muncie, Indiana</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund (IMF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Bank</td>
<td>A family reunion</td>
<td>The World Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A family reunion</td>
<td>Google, Inc. (international)</td>
<td>The Ministry of Education for Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Department of Education for the Commonwealth of Kentucky</td>
<td>The show choir in your local high school</td>
<td>The Roman Catholic Church (with its headquarters at the Vatican in Rome)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The show choir in your local high school</td>
<td>African Canadians</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Canadians</td>
<td>The Dineh (Navajo) people</td>
<td>The Chi Omega National Sorority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dineh (Navajo) people</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>The Republican Party in the United States</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of these fall into clear categories, but some are “on the line,” and one could legitimately place them in more than one group. It should be viewed as a continuum from micro to macro social units. See how your authors rate these at www.pineforge.com/osw.
This is a story of change as macro-level innovations enter a small traditional village. It illustrates how the social units of the social world model and the three levels of analysis enter into sociological analysis. As you read, try to identify both the units and the levels of analysis being discussed and the impact of globalization on a community that cannot know what these changes will bring.

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

Villagers had suspected something was afoot when important-looking officials arrived 2 months earlier with foreign businessmen, followed by two teams of surveyors. Without their approval, the government had sold the land that the village had held communally for generations to the foreigners so that they could build a multimillion-dollar hotel and casino. When concerned citizens asked what was happening in their village, they were assured that their way of life would not change. The contractor from the capital city of Tunis said that they would still have access to the beach and ocean for fishing. He also promised them many benefits from the hotel project—jobs, help from the government to improve roads and housing, and a higher standard of living.

As the bulldozers moved in, residents had mixed opinions about the changes taking place in their village and their lives. Some saw the changes as exciting opportunities for new jobs and recognition of their beautiful village; others viewed the changes as destroying a lifestyle that was all they and generations before them had known.

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

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

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

The Social World Model

The social world engulfs each of us from the moment of our birth until we die. Throughout our lives, each of us is part of a set of social relationships that provides guidelines for how we interact with others and how we see ourselves. This does not mean that human behavior is strictly determined by our links to the social world. Humans are more than mere puppets whose behavior is programmed by social structure. It does mean, however, that the individual and the larger social world influence each other. We are influenced by and we have influence on our social environment. The social world is a human creation, and we can and do change that which we create. It acts on us, and we act on it. In this sense, social units are constantly emerging and changing in the course of human interaction.

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

Throughout this book, the social world model will be used as the framework for understanding the social units, processes, and surrounding environment. Each social unit and process is taken out, examined, and returned to its place in the interconnected social world model so that you can comprehend the whole social world and its parts, like putting a puzzle together. Look for the model at the beginning of every chapter. You can also expect the micro-, meso-, and macro-level dimensions of issues to be explored throughout the text. Practice the levels of analysis in the following “Engaging Sociology.”
Chapter 1. Sociology: A Unique Way to View the World

What Have We Learned?

How can sociology help me understand my own life, who I am, and how I relate to others? This question was posed at the beginning of the chapter. Throughout this book you will find ideas and examples that will expand on the sociological imagination, illustrating how sociology can help you communicate more effectively and understand your interactions with others.

How do sociologists help us understand and even improve our lives in families, educational systems, or health care systems? Understanding organizations and bureaucracies can make us better family members, more effective citizens, and more adept at getting along with coworkers. As citizens of democracies, we need to understand how to influence our social environments, from city councils, school boards, health care systems, and state legislatures to congressional, presidential, and other organizations.

How do national policies and global events influence my life? As the world changes, we need to be aware of global issues and how they affect us, from our job changes and lost jobs to skills demanded in the 21st century.

We live in a complex social world with many layers of interaction. If we really want to understand our own lives, we need to comprehend the levels of analysis that affect our lives and the connections between those levels. To do so wisely, we need both objective lenses for viewing this

Engaging Sociology

Micro-Meso-Macro: An Application Exercise

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

The micro (local community) level:
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 

The meso (intermediate—state, organizational, or ethnic subculture) level:
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 

The macro (national/global) level:
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 

The next issue, then, is how we gather data that inform how we understand and influence the social world. When we say we know something about society, how is it that we know? What is considered evidence in sociology, and what lens (theory) do we use to interpret the data? These are the central issues of the next chapter.
complex social world and accurate, valid information (facts) about the society. As the science of society, sociology can provide both tested empirical data and a broad, analytical perspective, as you will learn in the next chapter. Here is a summary of points from Chapter 1.

**Key Points**

- Humans are, at their very core, social animals—more akin to pack or herd animals than to individualistic cats. (See pp. 4–5.)
- Sociology is based on scientific findings, making it more reliable than commonsense beliefs in a particular culture. (See pp. 5–9.)
- A core idea in sociology is the sociological imagination. It requires that we see how our individual lives and personal troubles are shaped by historical and structural events outside our everyday lives. It also prods us to see how we can influence our society. (See pp. 9–10.)
- Sociology is a social science and, therefore, uses the tools of the sciences to establish credible evidence to understand our social world. As a science, sociology is scientific and objective rather than value laden. (See pp. 12–13.)
- Sociology has pragmatic applications, including those that are essential for the job market. (See pp. 13–17.)
- Sociology focuses on social units or groups, on social structures such as institutions, on social processes that give a social unit its dynamic character, and on their environments. (See pp. 17–20.)
- The social world model is the organizing theme of this book. Using the sociological imagination, we can understand our social world best by clarifying the interconnections between micro, meso, and macro levels of the social system. Each chapter of this book will examine society at these three levels of analysis. (See pp. 21–26.)

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

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

**At the Local Level**

- **Student organizations and clubs:** Many sociology departments have organizations through which you can meet other students interested in sociology, get to know faculty members, and attend presentations by guest speakers. These clubs are usually not limited to sociology majors. If no such organization exists, consider forming one with the help of a faculty member. Sociologists also have an undergraduate honors society, Alpha Kappa Delta (AKΔ). Visit the AKΔ Web site at http://sites.google.com/site/alphakappadeltainternational and learn more about it and what it takes to form a chapter.

**At the Regional, National, and Global Levels**

- **The American Sociological Association (ASA):** This is the leading professional organization of sociologists in the United States. It has several programs and initiatives of special interest to students. Visit the ASA Web site at www.asanet.org, and click on the “Students” link at the top of the page. Read the items and follow the links to additional material on the advantages available to students.
- **State and regional associations:** These groups are especially student friendly and feature publications and sessions at their annual meetings specifically for undergraduates. The organizations and Web site addresses are listed by the ASA, with direct links to their home pages at http://www2.asanet.org/governance/aligned.html.
- **The International Sociological Association (ISA):** This organization serves sociologists from around the world. Every 4 years, they have a large meeting (Gothenburg, Sweden, in July 2010 and Yokohama, Japan, in July 2014). Specialty groups within ISA hold conferences in many different countries the other years. Check out www.isa-sociology.org.

For chapter-specific resources, including Frontline, TED, and YouTube videos; self-quizzes; web exercises; and more, visit www.pineforge.com/ballantine3e.