Why would anyone want to study interactions between friends and family, how groups work, and where a society fits into the global system? What can we learn from scientifically studying our everyday lives? The “scientific study of society” sounds rather official and terribly formal. What exactly does it mean to see the world sociologically? Can sociology make life any better—as the study of biology or chemistry can make life better through new medications? The first chapter of this book helps answer two questions: What is sociology, and Why study it?

The second chapter addresses “how sociologists know what they know.” This book and your sociology professor will argue that sociology is valuable. Why is that the case? Because sociology helps give us new perspectives on our personal and professional lives, and sociological insights and skills can help all of us make the world a better place. If sociologists find, for example, that education does not treat all children equally, how would we know that, what can be done about it, and what evidence would be considered reliable, valid, dependable, and persuasive? 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 that evidence?

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 for a trip through the fascinating field of sociology, our social world.
CHAPTER 1

SOCIOLOGY: A Unique Way to View the World

What to Expect...

What Is Sociology?
Why Study Sociology—And What Do Sociologists Do?
The Social World Model
So What?

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.
1. Why should I study sociology?
2. How might sociology be useful to me?
3. What do sociologists do? What kinds of jobs are available to people who have studied sociology?
4. How might local, national, and global events affect my life?
Several years ago, a man was determined to set a record by sailing across the Atlantic in a tiny, one-person craft powered only by the wind. The sailing vessel was designed and constructed by the man, who would embark alone on this perilous journey. The craft was so small that there was no room for anything other than food and water. He would have no radio or other communication device, and he would be out of contact with other people for the duration of the voyage.

The man departed from the east coast of the United States, and for two months, he sailed in solitude. Although he was feared lost at sea since he was not seen or heard from for many weeks, 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."

Strange as it may seem, the social world is not merely something that exists outside of us. As this story illustrates, the social world is also something we carry inside of us. We are part of it, we reflect upon it, and we are influenced by it, even when we are alone. The patterns of the social world engulf us in both subtle and obvious ways that have profound implications for how we create order and meaning in our lives. By being so totally alone for so long, this sailor learned how very social human beings really are. He learned that even when he was alone, he spent much of his time reflecting on people. He also learned how painful and disorienting it can be to live without human contact. In short, his experiences taught him a basic sociological insight: humans are fundamentally social beings.

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 here," read typical newspaper accounts, "This is something you see in Bosnia, Kosovo, the Middle East, Central Africa, and other war-torn areas. It's hard to imagine this happening in the economic center of the United States." Yet on September 11, 2001, shortly after 9:00 a.m., a commercial airliner crashed into a New York City skyscraper, followed a short while later by another pummeling into the matching tower, causing this mighty symbol of financial wealth—the World Trade Center—to collapse. After the dust settled and the rescue crews finished their gruesome work, nearly 3,000 people were dead or unaccounted for. The world as we knew it changed forever that day.

This event taught U.S. citizens how integrally connected they are with the international community. Following the events of September 11, the United States launched its highly publicized "War on Terror," and many terrorist strongholds and training camps were destroyed. Still, troubling questions remained unanswered. Why did this extremist act occur? How do the survivors recover from such a horrific event? Why was this event so completely disorienting to Americans and to the world community? These terrorist acts shocked and horrified people around the world because they were unpredicted and unexpected in a normally predictable world. They violated the rules that foster our connections to one another. They also brought attention to the discontent and disconnectedness that lies under the surface in many societies—discontent that expressed itself in hateful violence.

These terrorist acts represent, among other things, a rejection of modern civil society. Such acts are carried out...
around the world by right- or left-wing political or religious extremists (Smith 1994). The terrorists themselves see their acts as justifiable, but few outside their inner circle can understand the behavior. When terrorist acts occur, we struggle to fit such events into our mental picture of a just, safe, comfortable, and predictable social world. The events of September 11 forced U.S. citizens into the awareness that, as different as they are, they may be grouped together as “all the same” by people in other parts of the world. U.S. citizens may also be despised for what they represent, as perceived by others. In other words, terrorists view U.S. citizens as intimately connected even if citizens do not see themselves that way. For many U.S. citizens, the sense of loyalty to the nation in this adversity was deeply stirred; patriotism abounded. So, in fact, the nation became more connected as a reaction to an act against the United States.

Most of the time, we live with social patterns that seem routine, ordinary, and expected. An airline bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland; suicide bombings in Israel; and the Oklahoma City bombing of a federal building all violated our expectations about what is normal. Without shared expectations between humans about proper patterns of behavior, life would be chaotic, as the terrorist acts demonstrate. Connections require some basic rules of interaction, and these rules create routine and safe normality to everyday interaction. For the people in and around the World Trade Center, the social rules governing everyday life broke down that awful day. How could anyone live in society if there were no rules?

This chapter examines the social ties that make up our social world and the consequences of breakdown in those connections. In this first chapter, you will learn what sociology is, how sociologists view the social world, how studying sociology can help you in your everyday life, and how the social world model is used to present the topics you will study throughout this book.

**WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?**

On the tennis court, in a fast food restaurant, in your residence hall, or within your home, you interact with other people. Such interactions are the foundation of social life; they are what interest sociologists. According to the American Sociological Association (2002),

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

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

Unlike the discipline of psychology, which focuses on attributes and behaviors of *individuals*, sociology tends to focus on *group* patterns. While a psychologist might try to explain behavior by examining the personality traits of individuals, a sociologist would examine the position of different people within the group and how positions influence what people do. Sociologists seek to analyze and explain why people interact with others and belong to groups, how groups work, who has power and who does not, and how groups deal with conflict and change. They study factors that influence groups such as wars, trade between countries, and new technology. Sociologists ask questions about the rules that govern group behavior, such as dating or workplace rules; 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 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 within nations are ethnic groups and national organizations or institutions, including economic, educational, religious, health and political systems. *Nations* themselves are still larger and can sometimes involve hundreds of millions of people. In the past several decades, social scientists have also pointed to *globalization*, the process by which the entire world is becoming a single interdependent entity. Of particular interest to sociologists are how these various groups are organized, how they function, why they conflict, and how they influence one another.

**THINKING SOCIALLY**

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

**Assumptions Underlying Sociology**

As in all disciplines, sociology is based on a few important beliefs, or *assumptions*, that sociologists tend to take for granted about the social world. These ideas about humans
and social life are supported by considerable evidence, but they are assumptions in that they are no longer matters of debate or controversy because they are taken for granted. Understanding these core ideas will help you see how sociologists approach the study of people in groups.

Sociologists maintain that people are social by nature. This means that humans seek fellowship with other humans, interact with each other, and influence and are influenced by the behaviors of one another. Furthermore, humans need groups to survive. Although a few individuals may become socially isolated as adults, they could not have reached adulthood without sustained interactions with others. The central point here is that we become who we are as humans because we are social beings; other people and groups constantly influence us.

Sociologists assert that 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. Your individual beliefs and behaviors, your experiences, your observations, and the problems you face are derived from connections to your social groups.

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

Sociologists claim that 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.

Sociologists hold that 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. In the past half century, for example, Asian societies such as Japan, Korea, and Thailand have evolved from agricultural societies to complex, technologically based world economic powers. Yet such 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, as in the case of Japanese students protesting the building of a new Tokyo airport that was taking over farmland and polluting the countryside. Moreover, failure to change fast enough or to change in a particular direction can spark conflict, including revolution. Historical examples such as the Russian Revolution come to mind, where the aristocracy seemed unable to understand or respond to the needs of a starving and war-torn nation; the elites were violently overthrown. More recently, the collapse of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and the violence of citizens against
the totalitarian rule of the king of Nepal illustrate the demand for change that sprang from citizens’ discontent with authoritarian rule.

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

Sociology versus Common Sense

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 Bosnia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Sudan, East Timor, and the Middle East? Why do some families experience high levels of violence in the home? Why are fewer women than men employed in careers as scientists and mathematicians? Why is the homicide rate in the United States so much higher than that of other developed nations? Why do some people join religious cults? Your answers to such questions reflect your beliefs and assumptions about the social world. These assumptions often are based on your experiences, your judgments about what your friends and family believe, what you have read or viewed on television, and common stereotypes, which are rigid beliefs, often untested and unfounded, about a group or a category of people.

Common sense refers to ideas that are so completely taken for granted that they have never been seriously questioned and seem to be sensible to any reasonable person. Sociologists assume human behavior can be studied empirically; they use scientific methods to test the accuracy of commonsense beliefs and ideas about human behavior and the social world. Commonsense interpretations based on personal experience are an important means of processing information and deciding on a course of action. While all of us hold such ideas and assumptions, are they necessarily accurate? Would our commonsense notions about the social world be reinforced or rejected if examined with scientifically gathered information?

Sociologists use scientific research methods—planned, systematic, objective, and replicable or repeatable techniques to collect data—to study people’s interactions within social groups. Yet how do sociologists’ assumptions and research methods differ from what one observes and thinks about every day? For most people, the way in which groups operate seems obvious.

The difference between common sense and sociology is that sociologists test their beliefs by gathering information and analyzing the evidence in an objective, systematic, scientific way. Indeed, they set up studies so they can see if what they think is true may in fact be untrue. This is the way science is done. Consider the following commonsense beliefs about the social world and some research findings about these beliefs.
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. For instance, in the Wodaabe tribe in Africa, women do most of the heavy work while men adorn themselves with makeup, sip tea, and gossip (Beckwith 1983). Variations in behavior of men and women around the world are so great that it is impossible to attribute behavior to biology or human nature alone.

Belief: As developing countries modernize, the lives of their female citizens improve. This is generally false. In fact, the status of women in many developed and developing countries is getting worse. Women make up roughly 51 percent of the world’s population and account for two-thirds of the world’s hours-at-work. However, in no country for which data is available do they earn what men earn, and sometimes the figures show women earning below 50 percent of men’s earnings for similar work. Women hold many unpaid jobs in agriculture, and they own only 1 percent of the world’s property. Furthermore, a majority of the world’s illiterate people—64 percent—are women; only 77 percent of the world’s women over age 15 are literate compared to 87 percent of men. Illiteracy rates for women in South and West Asia are 46 percent and in Sub-Saharan Africa are 54 percent compared to 59 and 61 percent for men. These are only a few examples of the continuing poor status of women in many countries (Population Action International 1993; UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2006).

Belief: Young people in modern industrial societies who join cults are duped through brainwashing or other techniques into changing their beliefs and values; therefore, the key to combating cults is debunking the outrageous beliefs that are passed on to new converts. Extensive research using firsthand observation of new religious movements (and a variety of other methods) have been nearly unanimous in their conclusion: change in a sense of belonging to a group comes before change of ideas. Most recruits to religious movements are recruited through friendship networks or friendship-making strategies (Bromley and Shupe 1981; Lolland and Skonovd 1981; Richardson 1985; Roberts 2004). Once the people in the religious community become a group to which the person wants to belong and wants to conform, the person begins to modify beliefs in line with the group. Change of beliefs and values is a late stage in the conversion process, not the first step. Indeed, the same may be true for members of conventional religious organizations. As sociologist and Roman Catholic Priest Andrew Greeley (1972) puts it, “We might say that instead of Americans belonging to churches because they believe in religion, there may be a strong tendency for them to believe in religion because they belong to churches” (p. 115). So trying to persuade individuals who join cults of the error in their beliefs has little effect if they continue to see the members of the religious group as their primary friendship network.

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

Source: © Jessica Liu.
Belief: Given high divorce rates and a fear of commitment among American males, marriages (in decline since the 1950s) in the United States and Canada are in serious trouble. Although the divorce rate in North America is high, the rate of marriage is also one of the highest in the world (Coontz 2005). If the fear-of-commitment hypothesis were true, it is unlikely the marriage rate would be so high. Moreover, even those who have been divorced tend to remarry. Despite all the talk about decline and despite genuine concern about high levels of marital failure, Americans now spend more years of their lives in marriage than at any other time in history. Divorce appears to be seen as rejection of a particular partner 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. Upon examination, the social world is often more complex than our commonsense understanding of events. Throughout history, there are examples of beliefs that seemed obvious at one time but have been shown to be mistaken through scientific study. For example, people in early Western societies believed that the sun and the planets revolved around the earth, that the earth was flat (if a ship sailed too far, it would fall off), and that ridding the body of “diseased blood” through bloodletting and application of leeches to the skin would cure many illnesses. Each of these beliefs was tested, proven wrong, and modified over time using scientific findings.

Of course, social scientific research may also confirm some common notions about the social world: for example, the unemployment rate among African Americans in the United States is higher than that of most other groups; women with similar education and jobs earn less income than men with the same education and jobs; excessive consumption of alcohol is associated with high levels of domestic violence; people tend to marry others who are of a similar social class. The point is that the discipline of sociology provides a method to assess the accuracy of our commonsense assumptions about the social world.

It used to be taken for granted—a commonsense notion—that the world is flat, yet today the maritime workers on this ship have little fear of falling off the edge of the world. Many things that were once believed to be true have been disproven through empirical investigation in the natural or social sciences, and many more beliefs may be altered in the future.

Source: Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.
When beliefs about the social world are inaccurate, they can result in human tragedy. The genocide of the Nazi Holocaust and the existence of slavery both have their roots in false beliefs about racial superiority. If officials and citizens are to improve the lives of individuals in societies around the world, there must first be a reliable and 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 gain reliable understanding.

**THE SOCILOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**

What happens in the social world affects individual lives. Economic trends, such as inflation or recession, and political decisions, such as allocating national resources to defense or reducing health care spending, affect you and your family. If you are unemployed or lack funds for your college education, your personal problems often have broader social issues at their roots. The sociological perspective holds that you can best understand your personal experiences and problems by examining their broader social context, by looking at the big picture.

As sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) explains, individual problems or private troubles are rooted in social or public issues, what is happening in the social world outside of one’s personal control. Mills referred to recognizing the relationship between individual experiences and public issues as 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—what we might consider a personal trouble. 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 are not only deeply troubling to the person most directly affected but also related to wider political and economic forces in society. The unemployment may be due to corporate downsizing or to a corporation taking operations to another country where labor costs are cheaper and where there are fewer environmental regulations on companies. Although the causes of stress are social, people blame themselves or each other for personal troubles such as unemployment or a failed marriage, believing that they did not try hard enough. Often, they do not see the connection between their private lives and larger economic forces beyond their control; they fail to recognize the public issues that incur private troubles.

Families also experience stress as partners assume increasing responsibility for their mate’s and their children’s emotional and physical needs. Until the second half of the twentieth century, the community and the extended family unit—aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins—assumed more of that burden. Extended families continue to exist in countries where children settle near their parents, but in modern urban societies, both the sense of community and the connection to the extended family are greatly diminished. There are fewer intimate ties to call on for help and support, and this puts pressure on family relationships. 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 you learn about sociology, you will come to understand how social forces shape individual lives, and this will help you to understand aspects of everyday life you take for granted. In this book, you will investigate why much of human behavior is predictable, how group life influences your behaviors and interactions, and why some individuals follow the rules of society and others do not. A major goal of this book, then, is to help you incorporate the sociological perspective into your way of looking at the social world and your place in it. Indeed, the notion of sociological imagination—connecting events from the global and national level to the personal and intimate level of your own life—is the core organizing theme of this book.

How does poverty, a war, or a recession cause personal troubles for someone you know? Why is it important to examine the causes of these personal troubles by considering the broader social context of the problems? For example, how do the decisions of lawmakers and corporate leaders affect the lives of people who are experiencing personal difficulties?
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. Sociology remains descriptive and analytical rather than judgmental or value based. Applied sociologists, those who carry out research to help organizations solve problems, agree that the research itself should be as objective as possible; after the research is completed, then the applied sociologists might use the information to explore policy implications. For background on how applied sociology evolved, see The Applied Sociologist at Work, on page 12.

Consider the following examples of questions sociologists might ask:

- Sociologists might study issues related to abortion, such as who gets an abortion, why they do so, and how society as a whole views abortion. However, they avoid making ethical judgments about whether abortion is right or wrong. Such judgments are questions of values, not ones that can be answered through scientific analysis. The question about the morality of abortion is very important to many people, but it is based on philosophical or theological rationale, not on sociological findings. Still, once the objective analysis has been conducted, applied sociologists on either side of the policy divide might be interested in the relevance of those findings for social policy.

- A sociologist might study the effects of varying cultural standards of beauty on individual popularity and social interaction; 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.

- A sociologist might study the processes of becoming drunk and drunken behavior, which is often tied more to social environment than to alcohol itself. Note that a person can be very intoxicated at a wedding reception or at a fraternity party, but the expectations for behavior are very different. While conducting the research, the sociologist does not make judgments about whether use of alcohol is good or bad, right or wrong. At the research stage, the sociologist avoids—as much as is humanly possible—opinions regarding responsibility or irresponsibility. The sociologist does, however, observe the variations in behaviors in the use of alcohol in various situations and the way in which alcohol may result in more unconventional behaviors in certain social settings. An applied sociologist who is researching alcohol use on campus for a college or for a national fraternity may, following the research, offer advice about how research might help to reduce the number of alcohol-related deaths or sexual-assault incidents on college campuses.
Our Social World  Chapter 1

The Study of Society and the Practice of Sociology

by Ruth Pickard and Daryl Poole

The scientific study of social issues and the use of study findings to change society are closely woven together in the history of sociology. August Comte, often considered the father of sociology, and his eighteenth-century contemporaries were intrigued with the idea of applying the new methods of science to social issues; they believed the resulting knowledge could lead to social betterment. Since that early period, the relationship between sociology and its application has remained central to sociology but has taken various forms over time.

During its emergence in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sociology had a strong social reform base. Many early sociologists were concerned with the growing disorganization of family and work life that accompanied rapid urbanization and industrialization. They believed that scientific sociology could be used to control such processes and, thus, improve the conditions they considered undesirable. This notion was exemplified by Lester F. Ward, the first president of the American Sociological Society, who in 1906 wrote that the purpose of applied sociology was social improvement.

The early reformist sociology carried the seeds of an internal tension within sociology in the very methods it developed. Surveys and other techniques used by the reformers to gather data soon became the tools of sociologists in universities whose focus turned increasingly toward more academically accepted scientific scholarly work. Establishing credibility in academia meant defining sociology as a quantitatively sophisticated, objective, and value-free science. This concern for pure scientific analysis and reformist sociology goals—using sociological findings to change society—existed side by side and sometimes created conflict between sociologists. At the University of Chicago, which then had the leading sociology program in the nation, an original concern with real-world problems and reform, known as the “Chicago School,” gave way in the 1930s to a research emphasis that dominated both the Chicago program and the discipline of sociology for much of the next four decades. Despite this shift toward abstract, theoretical science, however, there continued to be some sociologists interested in putting sociological findings to use.

In the late 1920s and during the Great Depression of the 1930s, a large number of sociologists were employed by the government to analyze and address the U.S.’s escalating economic and social distress. With the coming of World War II, the research skills of many of these applied sociologists were directed toward finding ways to boost the morale of the country’s armed forces, mobilize civilian support, and demoralize the enemy. After the war, issues such as racism, crime, and illiteracy drew the attention of the action-oriented sociologists. This emphasis became a major subdiscipline of sociology with the establishment in 1951 of a new professional organization, the Society for the Study of Social Problems.

The economic good times of the late 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s supported and even encouraged applied research with social policy implications. During this period, sociology evolved along two lines: those sociologists who emphasized social action and those who pushed for increasingly sophisticated methodological and theoretical purity. Throughout this period, some prominent thinkers advocated the fusion of these scientific and action orientations.

In more recent years, applied sociology has received increased attention due in part to declining opportunities for university employment. Today, sociologists can be found in a wide variety of work situations, and depending on the focus, they may be known as sociological practitioners, applied sociologists, clinical sociologists, policy analysts, program planners, or evaluation researchers, among other titles. This role expansion is generating a vigorous new area of employment but also raising the old debate about the role of sociologists.

Sociologists learn techniques to avoid letting their values influence data gathering and analysis. Still, complete objectivity is difficult at best, and what one chooses to study may be influenced by one’s 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
two areas have common historical roots. Anthropology is how sociology might explore this same issue. The following discussion of four social sciences gives an example of how each might study the research findings and concepts. Research findings, and common topics, methods, concepts, research findings, and to guide policy decisions.

An anthropologist works as a cocktail waitress in a bar to study the subculture of that environment and to uncover subtle ways in which gender roles are reinforced. 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. A political scientist studies opinion poll results in order to predict outcomes of the next election or how elected officials will vote on proposed legislation. An economist studies the latest stock market trends and tries to predict its movement and its impact on banking practices. A cultural geographer studies housing settlement patterns and migration to help urban planners with more effective land use. A historian reviews documents related to World War II for a book on leading officials with more effective land use. A historian reviews documents related to World War II for a book on leading planners with more effective land use. A historian reviews documents related to World War II for a book on leading

From the information you have just read, what are some questions sociologists might ask about divorce or cohabitation or gay marriage? 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, myths, superstitions, 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 use the scientific method to study social relationships, to correct misleading and harmful misconceptions about human behaviors and social relationships, and to guide policy decisions.

An anthropologist works as a cocktail waitress in a bar to study the subculture of that environment and to uncover subtle ways in which gender roles are reinforced. 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. A political scientist studies opinion poll results in order to predict outcomes of the next election or how elected officials will vote on proposed legislation. An economist studies the latest stock market trends and tries to predict its movement and its impact on banking practices. A cultural geographer studies housing settlement patterns and migration to help urban planners with more effective land use. A historian reviews documents related to World War II for a book on leading figures who influenced the outcome of the war.

What all of these social sciences—sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, political science, cultural geography, and history—have in common is that they study aspects of human 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. The following discussion of four social sciences gives an example of how each might study the research topic of family stability and concludes with comments on how sociology might explore this same issue.

Anthropology is closely related to sociology. In fact, the two areas have common historical roots. Anthropology is the study of humanity in its broadest context. There are four subfields within anthropology: physical anthropology (which is related to biology), archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology (sometimes called ethnology). This last field has the most in common with sociology. Cultural anthropology focuses on the culture, or way of life, of the society being studied and uses methods appropriate to understanding culture. (Sociologists are more likely to focus on groups and organizational structures within society and on the patterns that arise out of group relations and culture.) Cultural anthropologists traditionally studied small, preindustrial, preliteracy societies, but today, many also study modern communities.

Anthropologists might study the degree of family stability in a society by living in the culture, talking with members, and making observations. How cultures deal with childrearing, sexual behavior, in-law conflicts, and reincorporation of family members into the clan following a divorce are among the many topics an anthropologist might examine to learn about family stability. They are also likely to compare the cultural practices of different societies to gain a broad picture of how family stability emerges in different cultural contexts.

Psychology is the study of individual behavior and mental processes (e.g., sensation, perception, memory, and thought processes). It differs from sociology in that it focuses on individuals, rather than on groups, institutions, and societies, as sociology does. Although there are different branches of psychology, most psychologists are concerned with what motivates individual behavior, personality attributes, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. Psychologists also explore stages of human development, abnormal behavior, and the mental disorders of individuals. For example, psychologists would be interested in the effects of family instability and divorce on children. A child’s self-esteem, attitudes toward others, and dysfunctional behaviors might be linked to family instability. Early thinking was that parental divorce affected mainly the development of young children. More recent psychological research has shown that adults also can be seriously affected by divorce of their parents (Wallenstein 1996, 2004).

Political science is concerned with government systems and power—how they work, how they are organized, forms of government, relations between governments, who holds power and how they obtain it, how power is used, and who is politically active. Political science overlaps with sociology, particularly in the study of political theory and the nature and the uses of power, but sociology studies a much broader array of social behaviors and institutions. Political scientists who are interested in families might analyze government policies that regulate marriage, divorce, childcare, and other matters. For instance, governments of some countries establish laws for how many children a family may have, and most governments create procedures for obtaining divorce. Of interest to political scientists would be the fact that Italy only recently passed a law permitting divorce; that for a quarter century, China has mandated that urban married couples have only one child; and that the
Netherlands, Britain, Belgium, and Canada approve and recognize same-sex marriages.

Economists analyze economic conditions and explore how people organize, produce, and distribute material goods. They are interested in supply and demand, inflation and taxes, prices and manufacturing output, labor organization, employment levels, and comparisons of industrial and nonindustrial nations. Economists collect and assess data and make predictions about various issues, such as women’s roles in the labor force and the costs and benefits to families of having one or two working parents. Sociologists tend to differ from economists in that sociologists ask questions focusing on social relationships, and they do not generally assume that all behavior is motivated solely by a utilitarian calculation of individual costs and benefits.

Finally, sociologists assume that human behavior can be studied empirically, and they focus primarily on groups and social structures. Sociologists who are concerned with the effects of economic conditions on families might focus on gender, class, and ethnic implications for social relationships (Healey 2006). For example, what effects do plant layoffs or the lack of jobs have on family stability? Sociologists might explore the effect of social movements on families, like the women’s movement or Promise Keepers, an evangelical men’s movement with a goal to restore traditional family values to American life. Other sociologists may focus on conditions in the local community and how they affect families or how population trends such as lowered fertility rates or immigration trends influence families. With the rise of two-income couples, sociologists are also interested in negotiation of roles about who does what in the family. Sociologists focus on individuals’ connections to groups (including their roles within families) and the relationships between groups that can be clearly seen when analyzing family instability (Renzetti and Curran 2003).

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

Why Study Sociology—and What Do Sociologists Do?

Did you ever wonder why some families are close and others are estranged? Why some work groups are very productive while others are not? Why some people are rich and others remain impoverished? Why some people engage in criminal behaviors and others conform rigidly to rules? Although they do not have all the answers to such questions, sociologists do have the perspective and methods to search for a deeper understanding of these and other patterns of human interaction.

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

- encourages a more complete understanding of social situations by looking beyond individual explanations to include group analyses of behavior,
- helps people to 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 diversity of cultural perspectives and how cultural differences are related to behavioral patterns;
- provides a means to assess the intended and unintended consequences of social policies;
- fosters greater self-awareness, which can lead to opportunities to improve one’s life;
- reveals the complexities of social life and provides methods of inquiry designed to sort out the complexities; and
- provides useful skills in interpersonal relations, critical thinking, data collection and analysis, problem solving, and decision making.
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 focused on two categories of students that exist in many high schools in North America: “burnouts” and “jocks.”

The “burnouts” defied authorities, smoked in the restrooms, refused to use their lockers, made a public display of not eating in the school cafeteria, and wore their jackets all day. Their open and public defiance of authority infuriated the “jocks”—the college prep students who participated in choir, band, student council, and athletics, and held class offices. The burnouts were disgusted with the jocks. 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.

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 jocks, for their part, became irritated at the burnouts when they caused trouble and were belligerent with authorities; then the administration would crack down on everyone, and no one had any freedom. Jocks found that if they did what the adults told them to—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’s observational field study at Belten High School, located in a community in the Great Lakes region, involved roaming the halls, visiting with students, sitting in the lunchroom, and listening to students talk to each other and to her about life in their high school. Since she was an adult, it took great skill to establish her credibility with the students and convince them that she was not a hall monitor or a spy for the authorities. She took notes on what she saw, overheard, and was told directly; she also went to local fast food restaurants to hang out and talk with students who were “playing hooky” or who stopped by after school. Eckert used this information as the basis for her research into social categories and sense of identity among teenagers in a public high school.

She 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 are rational behavior for college preparatory students, since those leadership roles help students get into their college of choice. However, those activities do not help one get a better job in a factory in town. In fact, hanging out at the bowling alley makes far more sense, for having friendship networks and acquaintances in the right places are more important to achieving their goals than a class office listed on one’s resume. 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.”

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

This unique perspective has practical value as we carry out our roles as workers, family members, and citizens. For instance, 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, causes of poor student learning that have roots outside the school, and other variables that shape the professional life of teachers and scholastic success of students. One example is understanding groups of students: how groups such as jocks and burnouts behave, how the needs of various groups conflict, and why each group’s behavior might be quite logical in certain circumstances. Burnouts and Jocks in a Public High School explores one study of a social environment very familiar to many of you, the social cliques in a high school.

**What Employers Want**

Sociologists have studied what job skills and competencies employers seek in new employees; these are ranked below in order of importance (Ballantine 1991; Brown 1987, 1993). Note that learning the following skills and competencies are part of most sociological training:

1. ability to listen to others, work with peers, and interact effectively in group situations;
2. ability to organize thoughts and information and plan effectively;
3. self-motivation and self-confidence regarding job responsibilities;
4. willingness to adapt to the needs of an organization;
5. ability to handle pressure;
6. ability to conceptualize and solve problems; and
7. effective leadership skills.

Many of these competencies reflect an ability to understand and communicate with others, an obvious concern of the sociological perspective. Keep these skills in mind as you proceed through this book. You might even be interested in a career with a sociology degree.

**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 jobs in social agencies, government, and business. 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).

Many sociologists with a bachelor’s degree work in the social service sector (such as criminal justice or family services), in government positions, or in business personnel offices. With a master’s or a doctorate degree, graduates usually become college teachers, researchers, clinicians, and consultants. For example, the duties of professors vary depending on the type of institution and the level of courses offered. Classroom time fills only a portion of the professor’s working days; other activities include preparing for classes, preparing and grading exams and assignments, advising students, serving on committees, keeping abreast of new research in the field, and conducting research studies and having them published; this “publish or perish” task is deemed the most important activity for faculty in some universities.

Most sociologists are employed in colleges and universities, but as Table 1.1 illustrates, and as mentioned above, a significant portion work in business, government, and social service agencies (American Sociological Association 2002; Dotzler and Koppel 1999).

**TABLE 1.1 Where Sociologists Are Employed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Places of Employment</th>
<th>Percentage Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College or university</td>
<td>75.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government (all positions)</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, for-profit business</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not-for-profit public service organizations</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: American Sociological Association (2006).*

The knowledge and research skills of sociologists are used in business to address organizational needs or problems, in government to provide data such as population projections for education and health care planning, and in social service agencies such as police departments interested in deviant behavior or health agencies concerned with doctor-patient interactions. These latter forms of work are often referred to as applied sociology. Applied sociology is an important aspect of the field; each chapter includes boxed inserts discussing the work of an applied sociologist and a section discussing policy examples and implications related to that topic.
What are some advantages of mayors, legislators, police chiefs, or government officials making decisions based on information gathered and verified by sociological research rather than on using their own intuition or assumptions?

Figure 1.1 provides some ideas of career paths for graduates with a degree in sociology.

You now have a general idea of what sociology is and what sociologists do. It should be apparent that sociology is a very 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 outlines the model you will follow as you continue to learn about sociology.

**The Social World Model**

Think about the different groups you depend on and interact with on a daily basis. You wake up to greet members of your family or your roommate. You go to a larger group—a class—that exists within an even larger organization—the college or university. Understanding sociology and comprehending the approach of this text requires a grasp of **levels of analysis**, social groups from the smallest to the largest. It may be relatively easy to picture small groups such as a family, a sports team, or a sorority or fraternity. It is more difficult to visualize large groups such as corporations—The 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 network of the United Nations. 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; however, 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 units. To understand the units or parts of the social world and their interconnections more clearly, see the social world model at the beginning of this chapter—the concentric rings on page 3.
and society as a whole.

Healthy and there are consequences for families, schools, and society. Likewise, if many people are spending extracurricular activities due to lack of funds, it affects children's lunches, requiring standardized testing, or limiting governments pass laws providing money to schools for a change in one institution affects the others. When kidneys, bladder—all social institutions are interrelated; like the system of organs that make up your body—heart, lungs, kidneys, bladder—all social institutions are interconnected, 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, and society as a whole.

Social Units and Social Structure

Social units are interconnected parts of the social world, ranging from small groups to societies. All these combine to form the social structure, the people and groups that bring order to our lives. The social structure holds the social units together and governs the way they work in combination, just as our body's skeleton governs how the limbs are attached to the torso and how they can move. However, sometimes the interconnections between social units are characterized by conflict and divergent self-interests. 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 in conflict.

Social institutions provide the rules, roles, and relationships set up to meet human needs and direct and control human behavior; they are the social units in societies through which organized social activities take place, and they provide the setting for activities essential to human and societal survival. For example, we cannot survive without an economic institution to provide guidelines and a structure for meeting our basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Likewise, we would never make it to adulthood as functioning members of society without the family, the most basic of all institutions. Other social institutions that are essential to a national society are educational, religious, political, and health care systems.

Institutions in society are interconnected. Like the system of organs that make up your body—heart, lungs, kidneys, bladder—all social institutions are interrelated, 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, and society as a whole.

Social Processes

Think of 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. The process of socialization that takes place through actions of families, educational systems, religious organizations, and other social units, teaches individuals how to become productive members of society. This is essential for the continuation of any society. Similarly, our social positions in society are the result of stratification, the process of layering people into social strata based on such factors as income, occupation, and education. Conflict occurs between individuals or groups for 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 impact the workforce, a beleaguered workforce can impact the economy, instability in the economy can affect families as breadwinners lose jobs, and family economic woes can impact religious communities since devastated families cannot afford to give money to the churches, mosques, or temples.

Sociologists generally do not say that these social processes are ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Rather, sociologists try to identify and explain processes that take place within social units. Picture these processes as overlaying and penetrating the whole social world, determining how every unit interacts with every other unit. Social units would be lifeless without
the action brought about by social processes, just as body parts would be lifeless without the processes of electrical impulses shooting from the brain to each organ or the oxygen transmitted by blood coursing through our arteries to sustain each organ.

**The Environment**

Surrounding each social unit is an environment. The environment is the setting in which the social unit operates; it includes everything that influences the social unit, such as its physical surroundings and technological innovations. Some parts of the environment are more important to the social unit than others. Your local church, synagogue, or mosque is located in a community. That religious organization may seem like it is autonomous and independent, but it depends on the local police force to protect the building from vandalism, and the health of the local economy influences how much money the organization has available for local benevolent outreach. If the religious education program is going to train children to understand the scriptures, the religious congregation hopes the local schools have already taught 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, if one local religious group is composed primarily of professional and business people and acts as a sponsor for the local Rotary Club, and another group is made up mostly of laboring people and provides space for the local labor union to meet, the religious groups may experience conflict because each one has a different constituency. As you can see, churches, synagogues, and mosques are linked to other local organizations in complex ways.

Think of the environment as part of our social world; 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. Some of those adjustments involve competition and conflict with other units that may want the same resources (time, money, skill, and energy of members); other adjustments involve cooperation as community organizations work together to sponsor a community festival or to raise money for a local teen recreation center.

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

Perfect relationships or complete harmony between the social units is unusual. Social units are often motivated by self-interests and self-preservation, with the result that they compete with others groups and units for resources. Therefore, social units within the society are often in conflict. Whether groups are in conflict or mutually supportive does not change their interrelatedness; units are interdependent. The nature of that interdependence is likely to change over time in each society 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 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 the larger unit that provides guidelines 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 goals, including the focus of the educational system. Thus, global tensions and conflicts may shape the curriculum that the individual experiences in the sociology classroom.

Each of these social units—from the smallest (the individual student) to the largest (society and the global system)—is referred to as a level of analysis (Table 1.2). Sociologists employ different theories and methods to explain human behavior, depending on the level of analysis. Therefore, it is important to know the level of analysis in any sociological research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Parts of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Micro-level</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analysis</td>
<td>Sociology class; individual student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University; sociology department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meso-level</td>
<td>Organizations and institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analysis</td>
<td>State boards of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro-level</td>
<td>Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analysis</td>
<td>Policy and laws governing education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global community</td>
<td>World literacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
level analysis

Analysis of the intermediate-sized social units, called micro-level analysis. Micro-level analysis is important because face-to-face interaction forms the basic foundation of all social organizations, from families, to corporations, to societies. These personal interactions occur in the organizations and groups to which we belong; therefore, we are members of many groups at the micro level.

To illustrate micro-level analysis, consider the problem of spousal abuse. One might ask why a person remains in an abusive relationship when each year thousands of people are killed by their lovers or mates, and millions more are severely and repeatedly battered. To answer this, several possible micro-level explanations can be considered. One view is that a person has learned from an abusive partner 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—by which the partners establish expectations of what comprises “normal” interaction.

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

Another possibility is that an abused woman may fear that her children 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 society-wide trends or forces. Meso-level concerns, discussed below, lead to quite different explanations for abuse.

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 the larger social forces such as global events shape our everyday lives. A political conflict on the other side of the planet can lead to war, which means that a member of your family may be called up to active duty and sent into harm’s way 5,000 miles away from your home. Each member of the family may experience individual stress, have trouble concentrating, and feel ill with worry.

To illustrate the impact of the macro level on our lives, consider the examples of a natural disaster in Indonesia such as the 2005 tsunami or a military coup in Malaysia; these disasters may change the foods you are able to put on the family dinner table, since much of our cuisine is now imported from other parts of the world.
Indeed, a severe depression in China or a recession in the Middle East may influence whether the bread earners in your own family have a job and can even afford to put food on the table or gas in the car. The entire globe has become an interdependent social unit; if we are to prosper and thrive in the twenty-first century, we need to understand connections that go beyond our communities to other parts of the world. The map on the next page suggests disasters that may have affected you.

Even patterns such as domestic violence, considered as micro- and meso-level issues above, can be examined at the macro level. Worldwide patterns may tell us something about a social problem and offer new lenses for understanding variables that contribute to a problem. 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 of individual human behavior often requires investigation of larger societal beliefs that support that behavior. Let us reconsider the following question: Why is it important to understand different levels of analysis? Recognizing the level at which a problem exists helps sociologists to determine appropriate research methods to study sociological questions (keeping in mind that the other levels...
of analysis will lend depth to the understanding of any topic). All three levels of analysis are discussed throughout this text. Micro-level analysis is most pertinent when discussing face-to-face interaction, small groups, and the process of socialization—learning to become a member of society. Meso-level analysis is necessary for the study of processes such as inequality within the society, and of institutions such as politics and education. Macro-level analysis explores issues for people as members of nations and for nations as they interact in the international arena.

Distinctions between each level 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 social units you know everyone or at least every member of the social unit is only two degrees of relatedness away (every person in the social unit knows someone whom you also know). We also all participate in 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 have connections with those people, and our lives are affected by people we do not even know. Consider political activities that take place on the Internet. In political campaigns, millions of individuals join organizations such as Moveon.com and TrueMajority, participate in dialogue online, and contribute money. The meso level is different from the micro level, but both influence us. The macro level is even more remotely removed, but its impact can change our lives.

MAP 1.1 The 10 Most Lethal Environmental Disasters of 2005. How might these disasters have touched your own life?

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

**THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY**

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

Building and staffing of this resort in Tunisia—which is patronized by affluent people from other continents—changed the economy, the culture, and the social structure in the local community.

Source: © Sylvie Fourgeot.

**The Social World Model and This Book**

Throughout this book, the social world model will be used as the framework for understanding the social units, 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. Look for the model at the beginning of every chapter; you can also expect the micro-, meso-, and macro-level dimensions of issues to be explored throughout the text.
The following case illustrates how the social units of the social world model and the three levels of analysis enter into sociological analysis. It is a story of change as macro-level innovations enter a small traditional village. As you read, try to identify both the units and levels of analysis being discussed and the impact of globalization and modernization 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 suspected something was afoot when important looking officials had arrived two months earlier with foreign businessmen, followed by two teams of surveyors. Their efforts to learn the meaning of these visits had resulted in assurances that nothing would change their way of life. To the villagers, the bulldozers did not look like “nothing.” In fact, the foreign businessmen had selected this location for a new multimillion dollar hotel and casino.

Land that the village had held communally for generations was now sold to the outside businessmen by the government, although the contractor from the capital city of Tunis assured concerned citizens 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.

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

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

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

To analyze the process of change, it is important to understand the interconnected parts in this situation. The institutions of politics and economics are represented by the government officials and the international business representatives who negotiated a lucrative deal to benefit both Tunisia and the business corporation. The community and its powerless residents presented few obstacles to the project from the point of view of the government, and in fact government officials reasoned that villagers could benefit from new jobs. However, economic and family roles of the villagers—how they earned a living and how they raised their children—changed dramatically with the disruption to their traditional ways. The process of change began with the demand for vacation spots in the sun. Ultimately, this process reached the village’s local environment, profoundly affecting the village and everyone in it. For this Tunisian village, the old ways are gone forever.
The social world engulfs each of us from the moment of our birth until we die. Throughout our lives, each of us is part of a set of social relationships that provide guidelines for how we interact with others and how we see ourselves. This does not mean that human behavior is strictly determined by our links to the social world; humans are more than mere puppets whose behavior is programmed by social structure. It does mean, however, that influence between the individual and the larger social world is reciprocal. We are influenced by and we have influence on our social environment. The social world is a human creation, and we can and do change that which we create. It acts upon us, and we act upon it. In this sense, social units are not static but are constantly emerging and changing in the course of human interaction.

The difficulty for most of us is that we are so caught up in our daily concerns that we fail to see and understand the social forces that are at work in our personal environments. What we need are the conceptual and methodological tools to help us gain a more complete and accurate perspective on the social world. The concepts, theories, methods, and levels of analysis employed by sociologists are the very tools that will 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 each lens allows us to examine in detail aspects of the world we might ordinarily overlook. That is what the sociological perspective gives us: a unique set of tools to see the social world with more penetrating clarity. In seeing the social world from a sociological perspective, we are better able to use that knowledge constructively, and we are better able to understand who we are as social beings.

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SO WHAT?

Why study sociology and of what use might it be? We live in a complex social world with many layers of interaction. If we really want to understand our own lives, we need to comprehend the various levels of analysis and the dynamic connections between those levels. Moreover, as citizens of democracies, we can influence our city councils, school boards, state legislatures, and congressional or parliamentary policy makers. If we are to do so wisely, we need both perceptive lenses for viewing this complex social system and accurate, valid information (facts) about the society. As the science of society, sociology can provide both tested empirical data and a broad, insightful perspective for analysis.

The next issue, then, is how one gathers this accurate data that informs how we understand the social system. 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.

CONTRIBUTING TO YOUR SOCIAL WORLD

At the end of all subsequent chapters, you will find ideas for work and volunteering that relate to the sociological ideas from the chapter you have just read.