Taking a New Look at a Familiar World

Sociology and the Individual
The Insights of Sociology
The Sociological Imagination

André graduated from college in 2011. He had been a model student. When not studying, he found time to help kids read at the local elementary school and actively participated in student government at his own school. He got along well with his professors, his grades were excellent, he made the dean’s list all four years, and he graduated Phi Beta Kappa. As a computer science major with a minor in economics, André thought his future was clear: He would land a job at a top software company or perhaps a stock brokerage firm and work his way up the ladder so that he’d be earning a six-figure income by the time he was 30.

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

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

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

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

After the breakup, Michael was devastated. He turned to his friends for support. “She wasn’t any good for you anyway,” they said. “We always thought she was a little flighty. She probably couldn’t be in a serious relationship with anybody. It wasn’t your fault; it was hers.”

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

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

But by focusing exclusively on such individual “deficiencies,” we overlook the broader societal factors that may have affected André’s job prospects. For instance, the employment situation for college graduates like André was part of a broader economic trend that began with the global financial crisis of 2008. By late 2010, 7.9 million jobs had disappeared, many permanently (Isidore, 2010). At the time I was writing this chapter, 9.5% of American adults (about 14 million people) were officially unemployed. Incidentally, the official unemployment rate only counts people who have been actively seeking employment for the past month. Thus it doesn’t include the 8.5 million people who were employed part time even though they wanted to work full time and the 822,000 so-called “discouraged” workers who had lost hope and given up looking for employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011a).

Furthermore, college degrees are no longer the guarantee of fruitful employment they once were. Job opportunities for college graduates improved in the mid 2000s, only to take a steep dive in 2009. Each year between 2004 and 2008, employers increased their hiring of college graduates by an average of 13% over the previous year (cited in Hunsinger, 2009). In fact, the job market became so good in the mid 2000s that newspapers began providing advice to college graduates on how to be “picky” when choosing a place to work (Knight, 2006). As late as May 2008, economists were still predicting a favorable job market for new graduates (K. Murphy, 2008).

But all that quickly changed with the economic recession. Currently, the percentage of college-educated young Americans who are either unemployed or are no longer seeking work—roughly 17%—is the highest it’s been since 1994, the first year such records were kept (Uchitelle, 2010). Indeed, about 20% of all unemployed people over the age of 25 are college graduates, up from 9.2% in 1979 (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2007; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011a). Only 56% of 2009 college graduates are currently working in jobs that actually require a college degree (cited in Rampell, 2011b).

According to the Collegiate Employment Research Institute (2011), about one third of employers reported definite plans to hire college graduates in the 2010–2011 academic year, a slight increase over 2010 and a sign of improvement. But that figure is well below the 47% of employers who had such intentions two years earlier. And the majority of employers who did intend to hire college graduates indicated they’d be hiring fewer people compared with the previous year.

For college graduates who do land jobs, starting salaries have stagnated. The average starting salary for those graduating in 2010 was $27,000, down from $30,000 for those who graduated between 2006 and 2008 (Godofsky, Zukin, & Van Horn, 2011). The “wage premium”—the taken-for-granted assumption that a college degree will bring higher wages—has lost steam in recent years. College graduates still earn nearly 46% more, on average, than people with high school diplomas (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011b). And having a degree brings higher pay even in fields that don’t require a degree, such as dishwasher, hairdresser, and cashier (cited in Leonhardt, 2011). But the education-based wage gap has been shrinking for several years (Uchitelle, 2005).
So you see, André’s employability and his chances of earning a good living were as much a result of the economic forces operating at the time he began looking for a job as of any of his personal qualifications. Had he graduated only a few years earlier (when the economy was doing better) or a few years later (when it is projected to improve), his prospects would have been much brighter.

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

But how would your assessment of the situation change if you found out that Jason—to whom Carole had always been secretly attracted—had just broken up with his longtime girlfriend and was now available? Like it or not, relationships are not exclusively private entities; they’re always being influenced by forces beyond our control. They take place within a larger network of friends, acquaintances, ex-partners, coworkers, fellow students, and people as yet unknown who may make desirable or, at the very least, acceptable dating partners. Social network Web sites such as Facebook and Twitter where people can post word of their relationship status are as popular as the more traditional places where people announce their weddings. As one columnist put it, “What good does it do to know that Joe and Jane are getting married? The news we really need is who’s breaking up—so we can go and . . . hit on them” (quoted in Soukup, 2004, p. 15).

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

In addition, Carole’s decision to leave could have been indirectly affected by the sheer number of potentially available partners—a result of shifts in the birth rate 20 years or so earlier. Today, there are roughly 120 U.S. men in their 20s who are single, divorced, or widowed for every 100 women in the same categories (Roberts, 2006). For a single, heterosexual woman like Carole, such a surplus of college-age men increases the likelihood that she would eventually come across a better alternative to Michael. The number of available alternatives can even vary from state to state. For instance, Michael’s attractiveness would have improved if he were living in New York (where there are more single women than men) but worsened if he were living in Alaska (where there are more single men than women; Kershaw, 2004). In sum, Michael’s interpersonal value, and therefore the stability of his relationship with Carole, may have suffered not because of anything he did but because of population forces over which he had little, if any, control.

Let’s take this notion beyond Carole and Michael’s immediate dating network. For instance, the very characteristics and features that people consider desirable (or undesirable) in the first place reflect the values of the larger culture in which they live. Fashions and tastes are constantly changing, making particular characteristics (e.g., hairstyle, physique, clothing), behaviors (smoking, drinking, exercising), or life choices
(occupation, political affiliation) more or less attractive. And broad economic forces can affect intimate choices even further. In China, where there is a large surplus of bachelors (see Chapter 13), young single women can be especially choosy when it comes to romantic partners, often requiring that suitors own their own homes before they’ll even consider them for a date (Jacobs, 2011).

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

Sociology and the Individual

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

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

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

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

National and international economic trends also affect your everyday life. You may lose your job or, like André, face a tight job market as a result of economic fluctuations brought about by increased global competition or a severe recession. Or, because of the rapid development of certain types of technology, the college degree that may be your ticket to a rewarding career today may not qualify you even for a low-paying, entry-level position 10 years from now. In one poll, 75% of young adults who dropped out of college cited the financial need to work full time as the principal reason why it would be hard for them to go back to school (Lewin, 2009b). And if you finish your degree but don’t get a good job right out of college, you may have to move back home—like 40% of people in their 20s today (cited in Henig, 2010)—and live there for years after you graduate, not because you can’t face the idea of living apart from your beloved parents but because you can’t earn enough to support yourself.

Government and politics affect our personal lives too. A political decision made at the local, regional, national, or even international level may result in the closing of a government agency you depend on, make the goods and services to which you have grown accustomed either more expensive or less available, or reduce the size of your paycheck after taxes are taken out. Workplace family-leave policies or medical insurance regulations established by the government may affect your decision whether and when to have a baby. If you are homosexual, the government can determine whether or not you can be covered by your partner’s health care policy and file a joint income tax return, whether or not you can inherit jointly acquired assets, or whether or not you can be involuntarily discharged from the military because of your sexual orientation. In the United States, decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court can increase or limit your ability to control your fertility, sue an employer for discrimination, use your property however you please, buy certain products, or keep the details of your life a private matter.

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

- In 2005, Hurricane Katrina killed thousands of people, rendered hundreds of thousands homeless and unemployed, contaminated local waterways, and decimated Gulf Coast industries such as tourism and steel, lumber, and oil production. Its economic effects were felt immediately in the rest of the country, where, for instance, gasoline prices skyrocketed. It also had a staggering impact on U.S. exports and on the travel industry—both nationally and internationally.
- In 2008, a stock market plunge in the United States instantly sent markets tumbling in Europe, South America, and Asia. The ensuing recession drove up unemployment rates in just about every industrialized nation around the world. Some countries, like Greece and Portugal, are on the verge of bankruptcy.
- In 2009, fear over the spread of swine flu dramatically reduced international travel—especially to Mexico, where the flu was purported to originate—thereby affecting global
airline companies and cruise operators in the United States and elsewhere. It even reduced exports of pork, despite assurance by health officials that there was no connection between the virus and food consumption.

- In 2011, a massive earthquake and deadly tsunami crippled many Japanese companies that manufacture car parts, resulting in a drop in automobile production in U.S. plants.
- Violent protests in Arab countries like Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen sparked fears of reduced oil imports and drove U.S. gasoline prices up over $4.00 a gallon in the spring of 2011.
- The technologically interconnected nature of the world has made the effects of international events almost instantaneous. In 2011, a Florida pastor made headlines worldwide for his highly publicized burning of the Qur’an. This act incited waves of violent protest half a world away in Afghanistan that killed dozens of people, including seven United Nations employees.

These are only some of the ways in which events in the larger world can affect individual lives.

**The Insights of Sociology**

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

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

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

- A young middle school girl, fearing she is overweight, begins systematically starving herself in the hope of becoming more attractive.
- A 55-year-old stockbroker, unable to find work since his firm laid him off, sinks into a depression after losing his family and his home. He now lives on the streets.
- A 36-year-old professor kills herself after learning that her position at the university will be terminated the following year.
- The student body president and valedictorian of the local high school cannot begin or end her day without several shots of whiskey.
What do these people have in common? Your first response might be that they are all suffering or have suffered terrible personal problems. If you saw them only for what they’ve become—an “anorexic,” a “homeless person,” a “suicide victim,” or an “alcoholic”—you might think they have some kind of personality defect, genetic flaw, or mental problem that renders them incapable of coping with the demands of contemporary life. Maybe they simply lack the willpower to pick themselves up and move on. In short, your immediate tendency may be to focus on the unique, perhaps “abnormal,” characteristics of these people to explain their problems.

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

The Sociological Imagination

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

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

Getting fired, for example, is a terrible, even traumatic private experience. Feelings of personal failure are inevitable when one loses a job. But if the unemployment rate in a community hovers at or above 20%—as it does in places hardest hit by the recent economic recession, like El Centro, California, and Yuma, Arizona—then we must see unemployment not as a personal malfunction but as a social problem that has its roots in the economic and political structures of society. Listen to how one columnist described his job loss:

Five years ago, when the magazine dismissed me, fewer Americans were unemployed than are now, and I felt like a solitary reject in a nation of comfortable successes. . . . If I were to get the same news now, in an era of mass layoffs and major bankruptcies, I wonder if I would suffer as I did then. . . . Maybe I would just shrug instead and head outside for a relaxing bike ride. (Kirn, 2009, p. 13)
Such an easygoing response to being fired is probably uncommon. Nevertheless, his point is important sociologically: Being unemployed is not a character flaw or personal failure if a significant number of people in one’s community are also unemployed. We can’t explain a spike in the unemployment rate as a sudden increase in the number of incompetent or unprepared individual workers in the labor force. As long as the economy is arranged so that employees are easily replaced or slumps inevitably occur, the social problem of unemployment cannot be solved at the personal level.

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

Mills did not mean to imply that the sociological imagination should debilitate us—that is, force us to powerlessly perceive our lives as wholly beyond our control. In fact, the opposite is true. An awareness of the impact of social forces or world history on our personal lives is a prerequisite to any efforts we make to change our social circumstances. Indeed, the sociological imagination allows us to recognize that the solutions to many of our most serious social problems lie not in changing the personal situations and characteristics of individual people but in changing the social institutions and roles available to them (C. W. Mills, 1959). Drug addiction, homelessness, sexual violence, hate crimes, eating disorders, suicide, and other unfortunate situations will not go away simply by treating or punishing a person who is suffering from or engaging in the behavior.

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

As tragic as this incident was, it isn’t unique. Between the 1950s and the 1990s, the U.S. suicide rate more than doubled for people between the ages of 15 and 24 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). Although the rate dropped during the early 2000s, it has recently increased again (cited in Tanner, 2007), especially among young girls (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). Suicide remains the third leading cause of death among young Americans, following accidents and homicides (Kent, 2010). In 2009, 13.8% of U.S. high school students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the previous year, and about 6.3% had actually attempted suicide one or more times during the same period (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).
Focusing on individual feelings such as depression, hopelessness, and frustration doesn’t tell us why so many people in this age group commit suicide, nor does it tell us why rates of youth suicide increase—or for that matter decrease—from decade to decade. So, to understand why the student at my university made such a choice, we must look beyond his private mental state and examine the social and historical factors that may have affected him.

Clearly, life in contemporary developed societies is focused on individual achievement—being well dressed, popular, and successful—more strongly than ever before. Young people face almost constant pressure to “measure up” and define their identities, and therefore their self-worth, according to standards set by others (Mannon, 1997). Although most adjust pretty well, others can’t. In addition, as competition for scarce financial resources becomes more acute, young people are likely to experience heightened levels of stress and confusion about their own futures. When the quest for success begins earlier and earlier, the costs of not succeeding increase. Such changes may explain why suicides among young African American men (ages 15–24), once quite rare and still relatively less frequent than suicides among other ethnic groups, increased from 4.1 deaths per 100,000 people in 1960 to 15.1 deaths in 1990 (see Exhibit 1.1). The rate has since fallen but is still double what it was five decades ago (National Center for Health Statistics, 2010). Some experts blamed the increase on a growing sense of hopelessness and a long-standing cultural taboo against discussing mental health matters. Others, however, cited broader social factors, brought about, ironically, by the growing economy of the late 20th century. As more and more black families moved into the middle class, they felt increasing pressure to compete in

Exhibit 1.1  Race, Gender, and Teen Suicide

![Exhibit 1.1 Race, Gender, and Teen Suicide](image-url)

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, 2010, Table 39
traditionally white-dominated professions and social environments. In fact, black teenagers who committed suicide were more likely to come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than black teenagers in the general population (cited in Belluck, 1998).

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

In other societies, different types of social changes may account for fluctuations in suicide rates. In the late 1990s, Japan saw its unemployment and bankruptcy rates rise to record levels as companies grappled with a severe economic recession. Since then, suicide rates have risen steadily each year (“Japan Suicides Rise,” 2010). According to Japan’s National Police Agency, over 25% of suicides are caused by financial problems such as difficulty paying bills, finding a job, and keeping a business going (cited in Curtin, 2004). Although the elderly make up the largest segment of suicides in Japan, rates have increased dramatically among elementary school, middle school, and college students. In fact, suicide has become such a problem that the East Japan Railway Company recently installed blue lights above train platforms in its stations in hopes that they will have a soothing effect, thereby reducing the number of people who jump in front of trains to kill themselves (“Japanese Railways,” 2009). Indeed, a veritable suicide subculture has arisen among Japanese youth, reflected in the dramatic growth of “suicide Web sites.” One such site rates various methods of suicide in terms of “pain,” “chance of success,” and “annoyance to other people” (Brooke, 2004, p. 11).

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

**ÉMILE DURKHEIM**

**A Sociological View of Suicide**

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

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

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

After compiling his figures, Durkheim concluded that there are actually several different types of suicide. Sometimes, he found, people take their own lives when they see no possible way to improve their oppressive circumstances. They come to the conclusion that suicide is preferable to a harsh life that will never improve. Think of prisoners serving life sentences or slaves who take their own lives to escape their miserable confinement and lack of freedom. Durkheim called this type of suicide fatalistic suicide.

Other suicides, what he called anomic suicide, occur when people’s lives are suddenly disrupted by major social events, such as economic depressions, wars, and famines. At these times, he argued, the conditions around which people have organized their lives are dramatically altered, leaving them with a sense of hopelessness and despair. A study of suicide trends over the past 80 years found that overall rates tend to rise during economic recessions and fall during economic expansions (F. Luo, Florence, Quispe-Agnoli, Ouyang, & Crosby, 2011).

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

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

Durkheim feared that life in modern society tends to be individualistic and dangerously alienating. Over a century later, contemporary sociologists have found evidence supporting Durkheim’s insight (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Riesman, 1950). Many people in the United States today don’t know and have no desire to know their neighbors. Strangers are treated with suspicion.

In the pursuit of economic opportunities, we have become more willing to relocate, sometimes to regions far from family and existing friends and colleagues—the very people who could and would offer support in times of need. One study found that membership in volunteer organizations (Parent Teacher Association, Elks club, Red Cross, League of Women Voters, etc.) steadily declined in the United States in recent years (Putnam, 1995). Over the same period, the average number of hours a day that people watch television by themselves increased (cited in Roberts, 1995).

The structure of our communities discourages the formation of bonds with others, and, not surprisingly, the likelihood of suicide increases at the same time. In the United States today, the highest suicide rates can be found in Alaska and in the sparsely populated mountain states of Nevada, Montana, New Mexico, and Wyoming (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011b). Exhibits 1.2a and 1.2b show this pattern. These states tend to have a larger proportion of new residents who are not part of an established community. People tend to be more isolated, less likely to seek help or comfort from others in times of trouble, and therefore more susceptible to suicide than people who live in more populous states. It’s worth noting that sparsely populated rural areas also have higher rates of gun ownership than other areas of the United States. Over 70% of suicides in rural counties in the United States are committed with firearms (Butterfield, 2005).

Durkheim also felt, however, that another type of suicide (what he called altruistic suicide) is more likely when the ties to one’s community are too strong instead of too weak.
## Exhibit 1.2a  Population Density and Suicide Rates in All 50 States (Suicides per 100,000 Residents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population</th>
<th>Persons per Square Mile</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population</th>
<th>Persons per Square Mile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
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<td>86.9</td>
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Exhibit 1.2b  States With the Highest and Lowest Suicide Rates

<table>
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<th>Persons per Square Mile</th>
<th>Suicide Rates Noted for Selected States</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 to 24</td>
<td>Alaska (22.1), Nevada (18.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>25 to 200</td>
<td>Montana (19.4), Wyoming (19.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201 to 9,800</td>
<td>New Mexico (20.4), New York (7.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 to 9,800</td>
<td>Massachusetts (7.6), New Jersey (8.7), Rhode Island (7.4), Connecticut (6.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011b, Tables 13 and 121
He suggested that in certain societies individuality is completely overshadowed by one’s group membership; the individual literally lives for the group, and personality is merely a reflection of the collective identity of the community. In some cases, commitment to a particular political cause can be powerful enough to lead some people to take their own lives. In India, the number of politically motivated suicides doubled between 2006 and 2008. For example, 200 people have taken their own lives in support of efforts to establish a separate state, Telangana, in southern India (Polgreen, 2010). Spiritual loyalty can also lead to altruistic suicide. Some religious sects require their members to reject their ties to outside people and groups and to live by the values and customs of their new community. When members feel that they can no longer contribute to the group and sustain their value within it, they may take their own lives out of loyalty to group norms.

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

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

### Conclusion

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

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

However, we must remember that individuals are not just helpless pawns of societal forces. They simultaneously influence and are influenced by society. The next chapter provides a more detailed treatment of this theme. Then, in Part II, I examine...
how society and our social lives are constructed and ordered. I focus on the interplay between individuals and the people, groups, organizations, institutions, and culture that collectively make up our society. Part III focuses on the structure of society, with particular attention to the various forms of social inequality.

YOUR TURN

The sociological imagination serves as the driving theme throughout this book. It’s not a particularly difficult concept to grasp in the abstract: Things that are largely outside our control affect our everyday lives in ways that are sometimes not immediately apparent; our personal biographies are a function of social history. Yet what does this actually mean? How can you see the impact of larger social and historical events on your own life? One way is to find out what events were going on at the time of your birth. Go to the library and find a newspaper and a popular magazine that were published on the day you were born. It would be especially useful to find a newspaper from the town or city in which you were born. What major news events took place that day? What were the dominant social and political concerns at the time? What was the state of the economy? What was considered fashionable in clothing, music, movies, and so forth? Ask your parents or other adults about their reactions to these events and conditions. How do you think those reactions affected the way you were raised and the values of your family? What have been the lasting effects, if any, of these historical circumstances on the person you are today? In addition, you might want to check newspapers and magazines and the Internet to determine the political, economic, global, and cultural trends that were prominent when you entered high school. The emergence from adolescence into young adulthood is a significant developmental stage in the lives of most people. It often marks the first time that others—including parents and other adults—take us seriously. And it is arguably the most self-conscious time of our lives. Try to determine how these dominant social phenomena will continue to influence your life after college. Imagine how different your life might have been had these social conditions been different—for instance, a different political atmosphere, a stronger or weaker economy, a more tolerant or more restrictive way of life, and so on.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

• The primary theme of sociology is that our everyday thoughts and actions are the product of a complex interplay between massive social forces and personal characteristics. We can’t understand the relationship between individuals and societies without understanding both.

• The sociological imagination is the ability to see the impact of social forces on our private lives—an awareness that our lives lie at the intersection of personal biography and societal history.

• Rather than studying what goes on within people, sociologists study what goes on between people, whether as individuals, groups, organizations, or entire societies. Sociology forces us to look outside the tight confines of our individual personalities to understand the phenomena that shape us.

KEY TERMS

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

anomic suicide: Type of suicide that occurs when the structure of society is weakened or disrupted and people feel hopeless and disillusioned
**comparative method:** Research technique that compares existing official statistics and historical records across groups to test a theory about some social phenomenon

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

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

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

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

**sociology:** Systematic study of human societies

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