PART I

The Individual and Society

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

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

Taking a New Look at a Familiar World

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André graduated from college in 2009. 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. Nevertheless, André began to question his own abilities: "Do I lack the skills that 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 had 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, bad attitude, 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 that began in 2008. From early 2008 to early 2009, 4.4 million jobs in the United States were lost (or 3.2% of all jobs); in the month of February 2009 alone, 651,000 jobs disappeared (cited in Goodman & Healy, 2009). At the time I was writing this chapter, close to 10% of American adults (more than 12 million people) were officially unemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009a). That figure didn't include several million other out-of-work people who didn't meet the government's official definition of "unemployed" because they hadn't been actively seeking employment in the past month. Indeed, an additional 9% of workers were employed part-time, although they wanted to work full-time (cited in Goodman & Healy, 2009).

Furthermore, college degrees are no longer the guarantee of fruitful employment they once were. According to the Collegiate Employment Research Institute (2009), 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 (Murphy, 2008).

But all that quickly changed. Seventeen percent of all long-term unemployed people are college graduates, up from 9.2% in 1979 (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2007). In 2009, employers hired nearly 22% *fewer* college graduates than the year before (cited in Hunsinger, 2009). In addition, between 2008 and 2009, the number of job openings for people with advanced college degrees dropped in just about all fields (Cohen, 2009).

Starting salaries for college graduates who did land jobs stagnated (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2009). The "wage premium"—the taken-for-granted assumption that a college degree will bring higher wages—has lost steam recently. College graduates still earn nearly 45% more, on average, than people with high school diplomas. 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, 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 outside forces. 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 MySpace and Facebook as well as blogs where people can post word of their breakups are becoming 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 have never been married, divorced, or widowed for every 100 women in the same category (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.

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 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. A strict Muslim is required to pause five times a day to pray. 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 Mylie Cyrus or Justin Timberlake 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 corporate boardrooms.

Broad 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. And if you don't get a good job right out of college, you may have to live at

home 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 change the amount of taxes you pay. Workplace family leave policies 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 insurance 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 options for controlling your fertility, suing an employer for discrimination, using your property however you please, buying certain products, or keeping the details of your life a private matter.

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

- 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 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.

- The fallout from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to affect foreign trade, international migration, university enrollments, and tourism. Many American companies became skittish about opening new stores abroad because of security concerns after the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 (Eichengreen, 2001), helping to slow the U.S. economy and limiting entry-level job opportunities around the world.

- 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.

- The technologically interconnected nature of the world has made the effects of international events almost instantaneous. In late 2005, a Danish newspaper published a series of editorial cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed in insulting ways. For instance, one cartoon showed him wearing a turban shaped like a bomb. By 2006, the cartoons had been reprinted in newspapers all across Europe. Devout Muslims consider *any* depiction of the prophet—let alone caricatures—to be blasphemous. Danish embassies were set on fire in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. Death threats were issued against the cartoonists. Violent protests erupted around the world, resulting in the deaths of dozens of people in countries such as Nigeria, Libya, and Pakistan.

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 (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 high 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'd 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, 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 25% or 30%—as it does in places hardest hit by the recent economic recession, like Pontiac, Michigan—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 unlikely. 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 (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.

EMILE DURKHEIM

A Sociological View of Suicide

Several years ago, a tragic event occurred at the university where I teach. On a pleasant night a few weeks into the fall semester, a first-year student shot and killed himself in his dorm room. The incident sent shock waves through this small, close-knit campus.

As you would expect in such a situation, the question on everyone's mind was "Why did he do it?" Although no definitive answer could ever be obtained, most people simply concluded that it was a "typical" suicide. People assumed that he must have been despondent, hopeless, unhappy, and unable to cope with the demands of college life. Some students said they heard he was failing some of his courses. Others said that no one really knew much about him, that he was a bit of a loner. In other words, something was wrong with *him*.

As tragic as this incident was, it wasn't and 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, after accidents and homicides (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). In 2007, 14.5% of U.S. high school students admitted to having seriously considered suicide during the previous year, and about 7% had actually attempted it (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008b).

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.

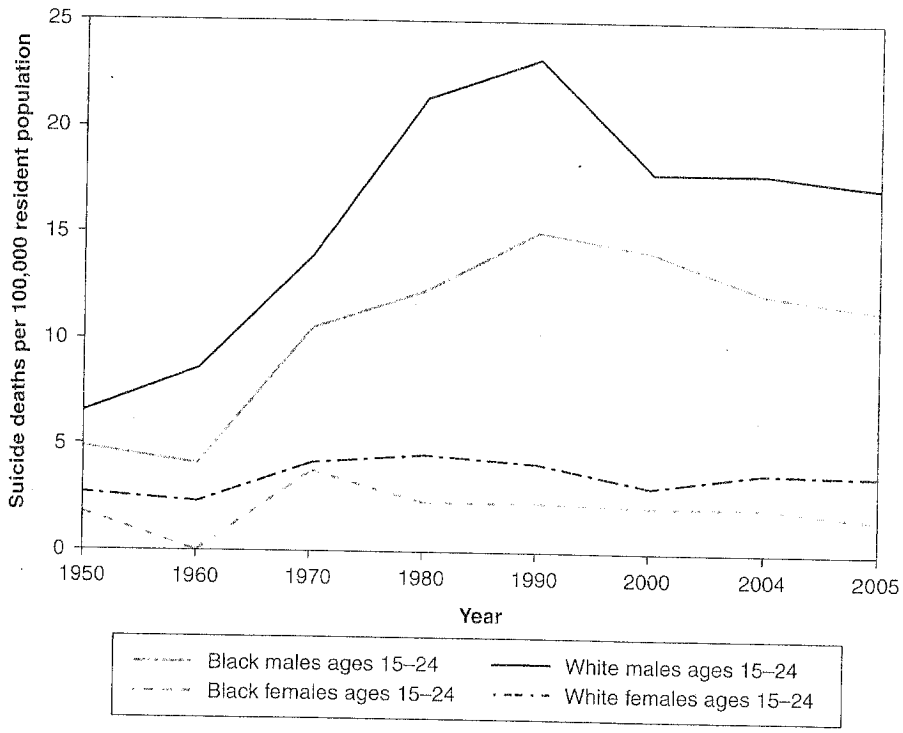
Clearly, life in contemporary developed societies is focused on individual achievement—being well dressed, popular, and successful—more strongly than ever before. Young people face almost constant pressure to "measure up" and define their identities, and therefore their self-worth, according to standards set by others (Mannon, 1997). Although

most adjust fairly 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. The quest for success begins earlier and earlier, and 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 more than double what it was four decades ago (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). 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. As more and more black families moved into the middle class at the end of the 20th century, they felt increasing pressure to compete in traditionally white-dominated professions and social environments. In fact, black teenagers who committed suicide were more likely to come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than black teenagers in the general population (cited in Belluck, 1998).

You'll also notice in Exhibit 1.1 that the suicide rate among young African American men dropped in the early 2000s. Can you think of a sociological reason to account for this trend? Is it less stressful being a black teenager today than it was a decade 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

Exhibit 1.1 Increasing Rates of Suicide Among African American Teens



SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, 2009, Table 45.

record levels as companies grappled with a severe economic recession. Since then, suicide rates rose steadily, reaching an all-time high in 2003. 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). Though the elderly make up the largest segment of suicides in Japan, rates have increased dramatically among elementary school, middle school, and college students. 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). Similar trends have occurred in South Korea, where the suicide rate has nearly doubled since the mid-1980s (Sang-Hun, 2007).

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 (Rosenthal, 2002). And in Ireland, which has the fastest-growing rate of suicide in the world, one in four suicides occurs among those aged 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.

Sociology's interest in linking suicide to certain processes going on in society is not new. In one of the classic pieces of sociological 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—perhaps the most private act one can commit—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 rates of suicide 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. Some 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 changed, leaving them with a sense of hopelessness and despair.

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 voluntary organizations (Parent-Teacher Association, Elks Club, Red Cross, League of Women Voters, etc.) steadily declined in the United States over the past several decades (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 (American Association of Suicidology, 2008). Exhibits 1.2a and b 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. Likewise, one study found that 7 of the 10 top areas for underage binge drinking were in Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota (cited in Egan, 2006). It's worth noting that sparsely populated rural areas also have higher rates of gun ownership than other areas of the United States. Over 70% of suicides in rural counties in the United States are committed with firearms (Butterfield, 2005).

Durkheim also felt, however, that another type of suicide (what he called ***altruistic suicide***) is more likely when the ties to one's community are too strong instead of too weak. He suggested that in certain societies individuality is completely overshadowed by one's group membership; the individual literally lives for the group, and personality is merely a reflection of the collective identity of the community. Some religious sects, for example, 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.

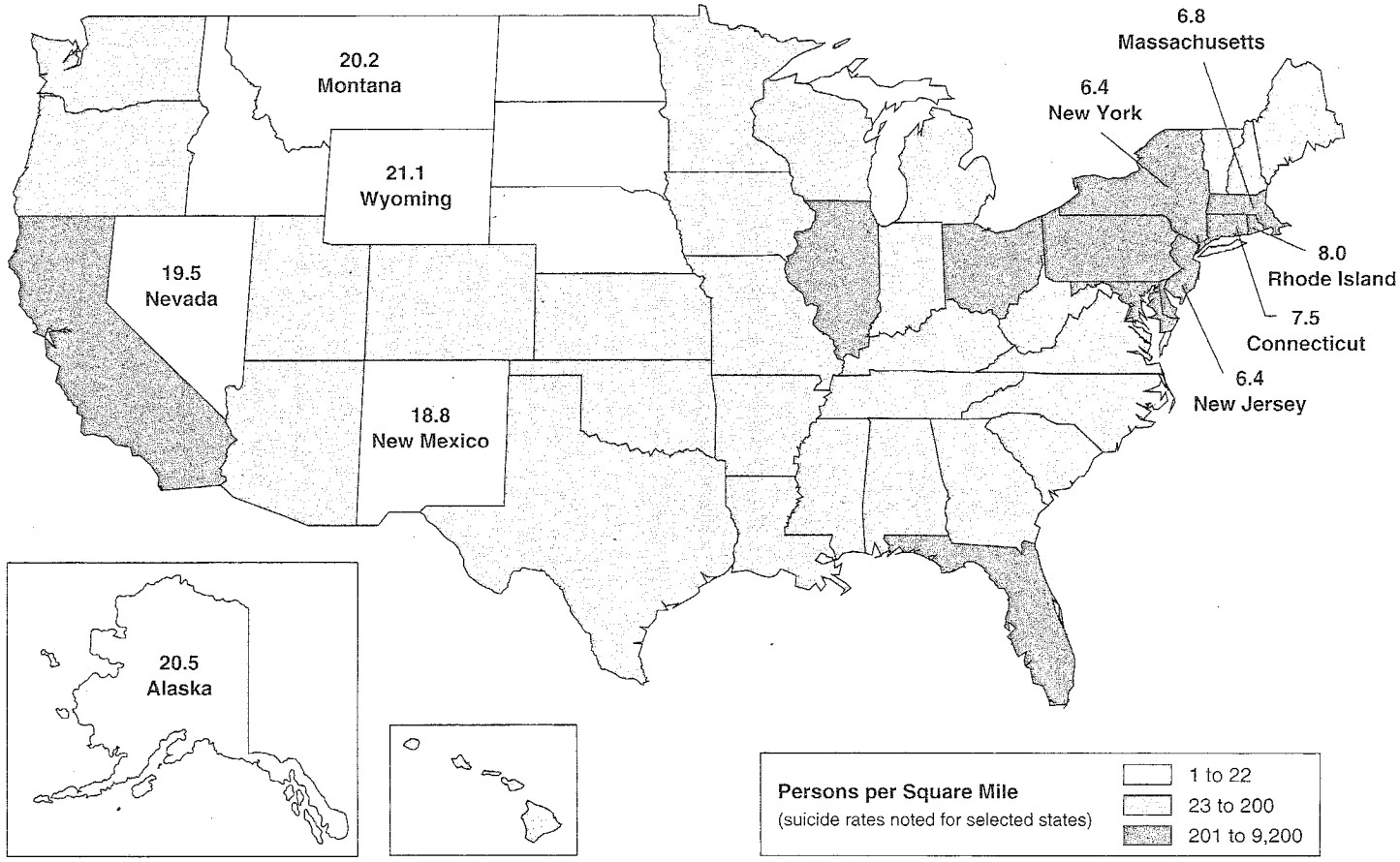
A terrible example of the deadly effects of overly strong ties occurred in 1989, when four young Korean sisters, ranging in age from 6 to 13, attempted to kill themselves by ingesting rat poison. The three older sisters survived; the youngest died. The eldest provided startling sociological insight into 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

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

State	Suicides Rate per 100,000 Resident Population	Persons per Square Mile	State	Suicides Rate per 100,000 Resident Population	Persons per Square Mile
United States	***11.0***	***83.8***	Missouri	12.2	84.2
Alabama	11.5	89.8	Montana	20.2	6.4
Alaska	20.5	1.2	Nebraska	11.6	22.9
Arizona	16.2	52.3	Nevada	19.5	22.0
Arkansas	13.9	53.4	New Hampshire	10.4	146.1
California	9.2	231.7	New Jersey	6.4	1,175.3
Colorado	16.1	45.0	New Mexico	18.8	15.9
Connecticut	7.5	724.5	New York	6.4	407.8
Delaware	9.2	431.8	North Carolina	11.9	178.3
District of Columbia	5.4	8,966.1	North Dakota	14.4	9.2
Florida	14.0	329.9	Ohio	11.3	280.0
Georgia	10.6	156.7	Oklahoma	14.3	51.7
Hawaii	9.6	198.5	Oregon	14.7	37.9
Idaho	15.1	17.3	Pennsylvania	10.9	277.3
Illinois	9.1	229.6	Rhode Island	8.0	1,029.9
Indiana	12.1	174.9	South Carolina	10.7	141.3
Iowa	10.7	53.1	South Dakota	12.4	10.2
Kansas	12.7	33.5	Tennessee	13.4	144.7
Kentucky	13.2	105.0	Texas	10.6	87.3
Louisiana	11.1	103.8	Utah	14.7	30.1
Maine	12.8	42.8	Vermont	14.9	67.4
Maryland	8.7	573.0	Virginia	11.0	191.1
Massachusetts	6.8	816.2	Washington	13.4	94.5
Michigan	11.0	178.2	West Virginia	15.3	75.5
Minnesota	9.9	64.5	Wisconsin	11.5	101.9
Mississippi	11.9	62.3	Wyoming	21.1	5.2

Exhibit 1.2b States With the Highest and Lowest Suicide Rates



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007.

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 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 try 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 study 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

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

Seeing and Thinking Sociologically

2

How Individuals Structure Society

Social Influence: The Impact of Other People in Our Everyday Lives

Societal Influence: The Effect of Social Structure on Our Everyday Lives

Three Perspectives on Social Order

In 1994, ethnic violence erupted in the small African nation of Rwanda. The Hutu majority had begun a systematic program to exterminate the Tutsi minority. Soon, gruesome pictures of the tortured and dismembered bodies of Tutsi men, women, and children began to appear on television screens around the world. When it was over, close to a million Tutsi had been slaughtered—half of whom died within a three-month period. Surely, we thought, such horror must have been perpetrated by bands of vicious, crazed thugs who derived some sort of twisted pleasure from committing acts of unspeakable cruelty. Or maybe these were the extreme acts of angry soldiers, trained killers who were committed to destroying the enemy as completely as possible.

Actually, much of the responsibility for these atrocities lay elsewhere, in a most unlikely place: among the ordinary, previously law-abiding Rwandan citizens. Many of the participants in the genocide were the least likely brutes you could imagine. For instance, Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, a former social worker who lectured on women's issues, promised the Tutsis in one village that they would be safe in a local stadium. When they arrived there, armed militia were waiting to kill them. She instructed one group of soldiers to burn alive a group of 70 women and girls, adding, "Before you kill the women, you need to rape them" (quoted in Zimbardo, 2007, p. 13).

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

A report by the civil rights organization African Rights provides evidence that members of the medical profession were deeply involved, too (Harris, 1996). The report details how doctors joined with militiamen to hunt down Tutsis, turning hospitals into slaughterhouses. Some helped soldiers drag sick and wounded refugees out of their beds to be killed. Others took advantage of their position of authority to organize road

blocks, distribute ammunition, and compile lists of Tutsi colleagues, patients, and neighbors to be sought out and slaughtered. Many doctors who didn't participate in the actual killing refused to treat wounded Tutsis and withheld food and water from refugees who sought sanctuary in hospitals. In fact, the president of Rwanda and the minister of health were both physicians who were eventually tried as war criminals.

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

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

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

How Individuals Structure Society

Up to this point, I have used the word *society* rather loosely. Formally, sociologists define ***society*** as a population living in the same geographic area that shares a culture and a common identity and whose members are subject to the same political authority. Societies may consist of people with the same ethnic heritage or of hundreds of different groups who speak a multitude of languages. Some societies are highly industrialized and complex; others are primarily agricultural and relatively simple in structure. Some are very religious; others are distinctly secular.

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

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

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

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

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

Imagine two people sitting on a park bench discussing the continuing "war on terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan. Person A is convinced that the actual threat to individual citizens, in the years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, does not warrant the erosion of civil rights and personal privacy through measures such as the USA PATRIOT Act, which allows the government to gain access to citizens' tax records, credit records, library records, bookstore records, and medical records without probable cause, consent, or knowledge. She thinks that the war in Iraq began under false pretenses and the mounting number of U.S. casualties is reason enough to withdraw all our troops. Person B counters that more recent terrorist attacks, such as those in Madrid, London, Bali, and Mumbai, show that we're always potential targets and that any means of preventing U.S. deaths at the hands of foreign terrorists is worthwhile, even if it means sacrificing some freedoms. He believes that leaving Iraq would be akin to surrender and would just embolden the terrorists. The debate becomes heated: One thinks that our nation's founding principles are the best protection for individual liberty; the other feels that individual liberty must be sacrificed if people's lives are in danger. These two people obviously don't agree on the need for or the effectiveness of a war on terror. But merely by discussing it, they are acknowledging that such a thing exists. In talking about such matters, people give shape and substance to society's ideals and values (Hewitt, 1988).

Even something as apparently unchangeable as our collective past can be shaped and modified by individuals. We usually think of history as a fixed, unalterable collection of social events that occurred long ago; only in science fiction can one "go back" and change history. No one would question that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776; that John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963; that hijackers flew passenger jets into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001; or that a commercial pilot safely landed a critically damaged plane in the Hudson River on January 15, 2009.

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

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

Consider the story of a young Canadian named Craig Kielburger. Over a decade ago, when he was 12, a front-page article in the newspaper caught his eye. It described a Pakistani boy about his age who was sold into bondage as a carpet weaver, escaped, and was eventually murdered for speaking out publicly against child labor. Upset by the story, Craig gathered up a few friends and formed an organization he called (Kids Can) Free the Children (KCFTC). Craig traveled throughout Canada and other countries addressing business groups, government bodies, educators, unions, and students on the plight of children worldwide.

Since then, the organization, which now has over 100,000 young volunteers in 45 countries, has built more than 450 primary schools providing education to 40,000 children a day (Free the Children, 2007). In addition, KCFTC supports clean water projects, health clinics, and alternative income cooperatives in 40 developing nations and has lobbied corporations to adopt standard labeling for child-labor-free products. Before Craig had even completed his college education, he had written a book, had met world leaders such as the Dalai Lama and the late Pope John Paul II, and had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He has won numerous awards and has been featured on *Oprah* and *60 Minutes*.

We live in a world in which our everyday lives are largely a product of structural, or ***macrolevel,*** societal and historical processes. Society is an objective fact that coerces, even creates us (Berger, 1963). At the same time, we are constantly creating, maintaining, reaffirming, and transforming society. Hence, society is part and parcel of individual-level human interaction (Collins, 1981). But although we create society, we then collectively "forget" we've done so, believe it is independent of us, and live our lives under its influence.

Throughout the remainder of this book, you'll see brief features called Micro-Macro Connections, which will help you see this interrelationship between

macrolevel societal forces and many of the ***microlevel*** everyday phenomena we experience as individuals.

Social Influence: The Impact of Other People in Our Everyday Lives

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

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

Sociologists tell us that these encounters have a great deal of *social influence* over our lives. Whether we're aware of their doing so or not, other people affect our thoughts, likes, and dislikes. Consider why certain songs, books, or films become blockbuster hits. We usually think that their popularity is a consequence of a large number of people making their own independent decisions about liking them. But research shows that popularity is a consequence of social influence (Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006). If one object happens to be slightly more popular than others—such as a particular song that gets downloaded a lot from iTunes—it tends to become more popular as more people are drawn to it. As one sociologist put it, "People tend to like what other people like" (Watts, 2007, p. 22).

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

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

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

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

The presence of other people may motivate you to improve your performance—for example, when the quality of your tennis opponent makes you play the best match of your life. But their presence may at other times inhibit you—as when you forget your lines in the school play because your little brother's in the audience making faces at you. Other people's presence is also essential for the expression of certain feelings. Have you ever noticed that it's impossible to tickle yourself? Being tickled is the product of a *social* interaction. Indeed, according to one study of laughter, people are about 30 times more likely to laugh when they are around other people than when they're alone (Provine, 2000). And our personal contentment can be linked to others as well. One recent study found that just knowing someone who is happy—whether it is a relative, friend, or acquaintance—significantly increases your own chances of happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).

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

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

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

STANLEY MILGRAM

Ordinary People and Cruel Acts

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

The curious thing is that people involved in such acts often show a profound capacity to deny responsibility for their actions by pointing to the influence of others: "My friend made me do it" or "I was only following orders." Can an ordinary, decent person

be pressured by another to commit an act of extreme cruelty? Or do cruel actions require inherently cruel people?

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

The subjects were told they would be participating in a study of the effects of punishment on learning. On a specified day, each subject arrived at the laboratory with another person who, unknown to the subject, was actually an accomplice of the experimenter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Societal Influence: The Effect of Social Structure on Our Everyday Lives

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

Statuses and Roles

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

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

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

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

Statuses are important sociologically because they all come with a set of rights, obligations, behaviors, and duties that people occupying a certain position are expected or encouraged to perform. These expectations are referred to as ***roles***. For instance, the role of a "professor" includes teaching students, answering their questions, grading them impartially, and dressing appropriately. Any out-of-role behavior may be met with shock or suspicion. If I consistently showed up for class in a thong and a tank top, that would certainly violate my "scholarly" image and call into question my ability to teach.

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

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

We feel the power of role expectations most clearly when we have difficulty meeting them or when we occupy two conflicting statuses simultaneously. Sociologists use the term ***role strain*** to refer to situations in which people lack the necessary resources to fulfill the demands of a particular role, such as when parents can't afford to provide their children with adequate food, clothing, or shelter. ***Role conflict*** describes situations in which people encounter tension in trying to cope with the demands of incompatible roles. People may feel frustrated in their efforts to do what they feel they're supposed to do when the role expectations of one status clash with the role expectations of another. For instance, a mother may have an important out-of-town conference to attend (status of sociologist) on the same day her 10-year-old son is appearing as a talking pig in the school play (status of parent). Or a teenager who works hard at his job at the local ice-cream shop (status of employee) is frustrated when his buddies arrive and expect him to sit and chat or to give them free ice cream (status of friend).

Role conflict can sometimes raise serious ethical or legal concerns. For instance, in states that use lethal injection as a means of execution, it is necessary to have an anesthesiologist present to ensure that the prisoner is unconscious when paralyzing and heart-stopping drugs are administered. Ordinarily, the role expectations of doctors emphasize ensuring the health and well-being of the people they treat. But when doctors are part of an execution team, they are expected to use their medical skills and judgment to make killing more humane and less painful. Several medical organizations, including the American Medical Association, have condemned physicians' involvement in executions as unethical and unprofessional (Elias, 2006).

Groups

Societies are not simply composed of people occupying statuses and living in accordance with roles. Sometimes individuals form well-defined units called groups. A ***group*** is a set of people who interact more or less regularly with one another and who

are conscious of their identity as a group. Your family, your colleagues at work, and any clubs or sports teams to which you belong are all social groups.

Groups are not just collections of people who randomly come together for some purpose. Their structure defines the relationships among members. When groups are large, enduring, and complex, each individual within the group is likely to occupy some named position or status—mother, president, supervisor, linebacker, and so forth.

Group membership can also be a powerful force behind one's future actions and thoughts. Sociologists distinguish between ***in-groups***—those groups we belong to and toward which we feel a sense of loyalty—and ***out-groups***—the groups we don't belong to and toward which we feel a certain amount of antagonism. For instance, a girl who is not a member of the popular clique at school, but wants to be, is likely to structure many of her daily activities around gaining entry into that group. In addition, like statuses and roles, groups come with a set of general expectations. A person's actions within a group are judged according to a conventional set of ideas about how things ought to be. For example, a coworker who always arrives late for meetings or never takes his or her turn working an undesirable shift is violating the group's expectations and will be pressured to conform.

The smallest group, of course, is one that consists of two people, or a ***dyad***. According to the renowned German sociologist Georg Simmel (1902/1950), dyads (marriages, close friendships, etc.) are among the most meaningful and intense connections we have. The problem, though, is that dyads are inherently unstable. If one person decides to leave, the group completely collapses. Hence, it's not surprising that for society's most important dyads (i.e., marriages), a variety of legal, religious, and cultural restrictions are in place that make it difficult for people to dissolve them.

The addition of one person to a dyad—forming what Simmel called a ***triad***—fundamentally changes the nature of the group. Although triads might appear more stable than dyads because the withdrawal of one person needn't destroy the group, they develop other problems. If you're one of three children in your family, you already know that triads always contain the potential for ***coalitions***—when two individuals pair up and perhaps conspire against the third.

Groups can also be classified by their influence on our everyday lives. A ***primary group*** consists of a small number of members who have direct contact with each other over a relatively long period of time. Emotional attachment is high in such groups, and members have intimate knowledge of each other's lives. Families and networks of close friends are primary groups. A ***secondary group***, in contrast, is much more formal and impersonal. The group is established for a specific task, such as the production or sale of consumer goods, and members are less emotionally committed to one another. Their roles tend to be highly structured. Primary groups may form within secondary groups, as when close friendships form among coworkers, but in general, secondary groups require less emotional investment than primary groups.

Like societies, groups have a reality that is more than just the sum of their members; a change in a group's membership doesn't necessarily alter its basic structure. Secondary groups can endure changing membership relatively easily if some, or even all, individuals leave and new ones enter—as for example, when the senior class in a high school graduates and is replaced in the school the following year by a new group of students. Change in primary groups—perhaps through divorce or death—however, produces some dramatic effects on the nature and identity of the group, although the group itself still exists.

Although people of the same race, gender, ethnicity, or religion are not social groups in the strictest sense of the term, they function like groups in that members share certain characteristics and interests. They become an important source of a person's identity. For instance, members of a particular racial or ethnic group may organize into a well-defined unit to fight for a political cause. The feelings of "we-ness" or "they-ness" generated by such group membership can be constructive or dangerous, encouraging pride and unity in some cases and anger, bitterness, and hatred toward outsiders in others.

Organizations

At an even higher level of complexity are social units called ***organizations***, networks of statuses and groups created for a specific purpose. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Oxford University, Microsoft, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the National Organization for Women, and the Methodist Church are all examples of organizations. Organizations contain groups as well as individuals occupying clearly defined statuses and taking on clearly defined roles.

Some of the groups within organizations are transitory, some are more permanent. For instance, a university consists of individual classes that disband at the end of the semester, as well as more permanent groups such as the faculty, administration, secretarial staff, maintenance staff, and alumni.

Large, formal organizations are often characterized by a *hierarchical division of labor*. Each person in an organization occupies a position that has a specific set of duties and responsibilities, and those positions can be "ranked" according to their relative power and importance. At Honda, for instance, assembly-line workers typically don't make hiring decisions or set budgetary policies, and the vice president in charge of marketing doesn't spray paint the underbodies of newly assembled Accords. In general, people occupy certain positions in an organization because they have the skills to do the job that is required of them. When a person can no longer meet the requirements of the job, he or she can be replaced without seriously affecting the functioning of the organization.

Organizations are a profoundly common and visible feature of everyday social life, as you'll see in Chapter 9. Most of us cannot acquire food, get an education, pray, undergo lifesaving surgery, or earn a salary without coming into contact with or becoming a member of some organization. To be a full-fledged member of modern society is to be deeply involved in some form of organizational life.

Social Institutions

When stable sets of statuses, roles, groups, and organizations form, they provide the foundation for addressing fundamental societal needs. These enduring patterns of social life are called ***social institutions***. Sociologists usually think of institutions as the building blocks that organize society. They are the patterned ways of solving the problems and meeting the requirements of a particular society. Although there may be conflict over what society "needs" and how best to fulfill those needs, all societies must have some systematic way of organizing the various aspects of everyday life.

Key social institutions in modern society include the family, education, economics, politics and law, and religion. Some sociologists add health care, the military, and the mass media to the list.

Family. All societies must have a way of replacing their members, and reproduction is essential to the survival of human society as a whole. Within the institution of family, sexual relations among adults are regulated; people are cared for; children are born, protected, and socialized; and newcomers are provided an identity—a "lineage"—that gives them a sense of belonging. Just how these activities are carried out varies from society to society. Indeed, different societies have different ideas about which relationships qualify for designation as family. But the institution of family, whatever its form, remains the hub of social life in virtually all societies (Turner, 1972).

Education. Young people need to be taught what it means to be a member of the society in which they live and how to survive in it. In small, simple societies, the family is the primary institution responsible for socializing new members into the culture. However, as societies become more complex, it becomes exceedingly difficult for a family to teach its members all they need to know to function and survive. Hence, most modern, complex societies have an elaborate system of schools—preschool, primary, secondary, college, professional—which not only create and disseminate knowledge and information but also train individuals for future careers and teach them their "place" in society.

Economy. From the beginning, human societies have faced the problems of securing enough food and protecting people from the environment (Turner, 1972). Today, modern societies have systematic ways of gathering resources, converting them into goods and commodities, and distributing them to members. In addition, societies provide ways of coordinating and facilitating the operation of this massive process. For instance, banks, accounting firms, insurance companies, stock brokerages, transportation agencies, and computer networks don't produce goods themselves but provide services that make the gathering, producing, and distributing of goods possible. To facilitate the distribution of both goods and services, economic institutions adopt a system of common currency and an identifiable mode of exchange. In some societies, the economy is driven by the value of efficient production and the need to maximize profits; in others, the collective well-being of the population is the primary focus.

Politics and Law. All societies face the problem of how to preserve order, avoid chaos, and make important social decisions. The legal system provides explicit laws or rules of conduct and mechanisms for enforcing those laws, settling disputes, and changing outdated laws or creating new ones (Turner, 1972). These activities take place within a larger system of governance that allocates and acknowledges power, authority, and leadership. In a democracy, the governance process includes the citizens, who have a say in who leads them; in a monarchy, kings or queens can claim that their birthright entitles them to positions of leadership. In some societies, the transfer of power is efficient and mannerly; in others, it is violent.

Religion. In the process of meeting the familial, educational, economic, and political needs of society, some individuals thrive, whereas others suffer. Hence, all societies also face the problem of providing their less successful members with a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Religion gives individuals a belief system for understanding their existence as well as a network of personal support in times of need. Although many members of a given society may actively reject religion, it remains one of the

most enduring and powerful social institutions. Although religion provides enormous comfort to some people, it can also be a source of hatred and irreparable divisions.

Health Care. One of the profoundly universal facts of human life is that people get sick and die. In some societies, healing the sick and managing the transition to death involves spiritual or supernatural intervention; other societies rely on science and modern technology. Most modern societies have established a complex system of health care to disseminate medical treatments. Doctors, nurses, hospitals, pharmacies, drug and medical equipment manufacturers, and patients all play an active role in the health care system.

Military. To deal with the possibility of attack from outside and the protection of national interests, many societies maintain an active military defense. However, militaries are used not only to defend societies but also, at times, to attack other countries in order to acquire land, resources, or power. In other cases, the military is used for political change, as when the U.S. military was mobilized to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003.

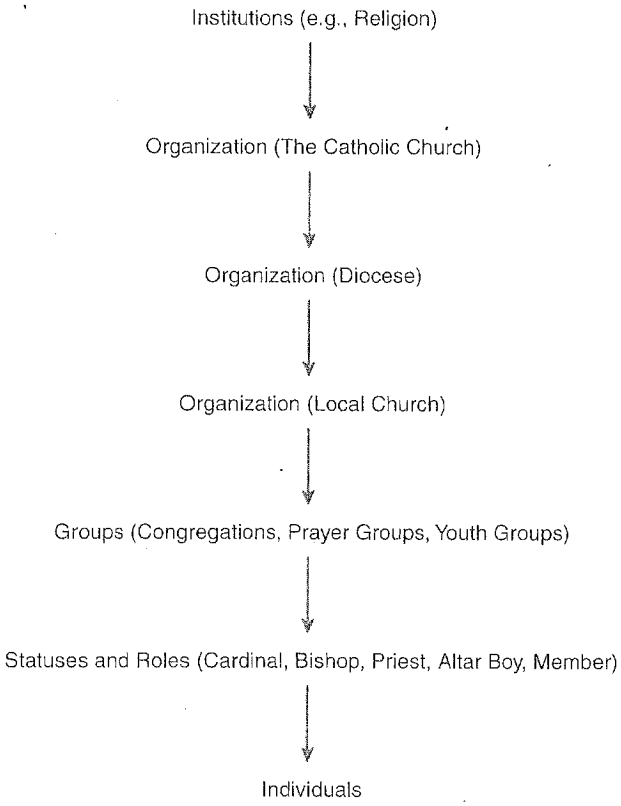
Mass Media. In very small, relatively close-knit societies, information can be shared through word of mouth. However, as societies become more complex, the dissemination of information requires a massive coordinated system. The modern mass media—radio, newspapers, television, and the Internet—provide coverage of important societal events so individuals can make informed decisions about their own lives. But the media do more than report events of local, national, and international significance. They also actively mold public opinion and project and reinforce a society's values.

From these very brief descriptions, you can see that the social institutions within a society are highly interrelated. Current debates over the state of the U.S. health care system make people aware of its links to the economy and politics. And religion and politics can play a major role in what gets taught in schools. For instance, in 2005, the Kansas Board of Education, in response to pressure from anti-evolution religious organizations, held hearings to determine if it would require public school science classes to give equal time to religiously based ideas about the origins of life. The members voted to include criticisms of evolution in the curriculum, though that decision was reversed two years later, after the election of several new board members. Nevertheless, in 2007, the only candidate for president of the National Association of State Boards of Education—an organization that plays a major role in shaping national educational policy—was an anti-evolution member of the Kansas school board (Dean, 2007).

To individual members of society, social institutions appear huge, natural, and inevitable. Most of us couldn't imagine life without a family. Nor could most of us fathom what society would be like without a stable system of government, a common currency, schools to educate our children, or an effective military. It is very easy, then, to think that institutions exist independently of people.

But one of the important themes that will be revisited throughout this book is that we each have a role to play in maintaining or changing social institutions, as when citizens change the political shape of a country by voting out of office an administration with which they've grown displeased. Although the effects of changes can be felt at the organizational and institutional levels, they are ultimately initiated, implemented, or rejected, and, most important, experienced by individual people. The interrelationships between individuals and the various components of social structure can be seen in Exhibit 2.1.

Exhibit 2.1 Social Structure and the Individual



MARION NESTLE

The Economics and Politics of Food

Institutional influence is sometimes not so obvious. For instance, we usually think of nutrition as an inherent property of the foods we eat. Either something is good for us or it's not good for us, right? And we trust that the nutritional value of certain foods emerges from scientific discovery. We rarely consider the economic and political role that food companies play in shaping our tastes and our dietary standards (Pollan, 2007).

Marion Nestle (2002), a professor of nutrition and food studies, wanted to examine the institutional underpinnings of our ideas about health and nutrition. She faced an interesting data-gathering dilemma, however. No one involved in the food industry was willing to talk to her "on the record." So she compiled information from government reports, newspapers, magazines, speeches, advocacy materials, conference exhibits, and supermarkets. She also used information that she'd previously received from lobbying groups and trade associations representing diverse interests such as the salt, sugar, vitamin, wheat, soybean, flaxseed, and blueberry industries.

Despite alarming levels of food hunger among the world's population (see Chapter 10), the United States has so much food that we could feed our citizens twice over. Many Americans regularly buy more food than they actually need (hence, the popular "doggy bag"). The food industry is therefore highly competitive. But like all major industries, companies are beholden to their stockholders rather than the consuming public. Marketing foods that are healthy and nutritious is a company's goal only if it can increase sales.

Food marketers have long identified children as their most attractive targets. According to Nestle, the attention paid to children has escalated in recent years because of their increasing responsibility for purchasing decisions. Children between 6 and 19 are estimated to influence upward of $500 billion in food purchases each year (cited in Nestle, 2002). By age seven, most children can shop independently, ask for information about what they want, and show off their purchases to other children.

Soft drink companies have become especially adept at targeting young people with diverse marketing strategies. Soft drinks have replaced milk as the primary beverage in the diets of American children as well as adults. Between 1985 and 1997, U.S. school districts decreased the amount of milk they bought by 30% and increased their purchases of carbonated sodas by 1,100% (cited in Nestle, 2002). The typical American teenage boy gets about 9% of his daily caloric intake from soft drinks, and about 20% of one- and two-year-olds now regularly drink soda (Schlosser, 2001).

One of the most controversial marketing strategies in the soft drink industry is the "pouring rights" agreement, in which a company buys the exclusive right to sell its products in all schools in a particular district. For instance, several years ago one 53-school district in Colorado signed a 10-year, $8 million pouring rights agreement with Coca-Cola. In financially strapped districts, a pouring rights contract often supplies a significant part of the district's annual funding. It may be the only thing that allows a school system to buy much needed resources like computers and textbooks.

Besides the lump sum agreed to in the contract, companies frequently offer school districts cash bonuses if they exceed certain sales targets. Hence, it is in the district's financial interest to encourage students to consume more soft drinks. In light of such incentives, ethical implications and health concerns become secondary. Indeed, many school districts justify these agreements by saying that soft drinks pervade the culture and students will drink them anyway, so why not get some benefit?

In addition to the long-term health effects of heavy soft drink consumption, however, Nestle points out that students learn a somewhat cynical lesson: that school officials are willing to compromise nutritional principles (and the students' physical well-being) for financial gain. Pouring rights contracts can also have a serious impact on long-term school funding. While they may solve short-term financial needs, they may also hamper efforts to secure adequate federal, state, and local funding for public education. Taxpayers may come to the conclusion that raising taxes to support public schools is unnecessary if the bulk of a district's operating budget comes from these commercial contracts.

In 2006, in response to criticism and the threat of lawsuits, beverage makers agreed to remove sweetened drinks from school cafeterias and vending machines (Burros & Warner, 2006). But the agreement is a voluntary one, so it remains to be seen what impact it will have on the overall health of young people. No matter the outcome, pouring rights agreements will continue to play a significant role in school district budgets. In these contracts, we can see how a child's food choices in school are linked deeply and profoundly to broader educational, political, and economic needs, often with little, if any, attention paid to nutritional considerations and individual health.

Culture

The most pervasive element of society is ***culture***, which consists of the language, values, beliefs, rules, behaviors, and physical artifacts of a society. Think of it as a society's "personality." Culture gives us codes of conduct—the proper, acceptable ways of doing things. We usually don't think twice about it, yet it colors everything we experience.

Human societies would be chaotic and unlivable if they didn't have cultures that allow people to live together under the same set of general rules. But culture can also sometimes lead to tragedy. In 2005, a high-speed Japanese commuter train crashed,

killing close to 100 passengers. The driver was going too fast when the train jumped off the tracks on a curve and crashed into an apartment building. But on closer inspection, we can see that the root cause of the accident rested in the harmful effects of culture. The train was 90 seconds behind schedule, and in Japanese culture, where efficiency and punctuality take on vital importance, trains are considered late when they are a mere 60 seconds behind schedule. A 90-second delay was unacceptable, and the driver knew it. Everyday life in Japan is so tightly scheduled that it leaves little room for casual or slow-paced travel (Onishi, 2005)—or even in, some cases, for safety.

Culture is particularly apparent when someone questions or violates it. Those who do not believe what the majority believes, value what the majority values, or obey the same rules the majority obeys are likely to experience punishment, psychiatric attention, or social ostracism. I will discuss the power of culture in more detail in Chapter 4, but here we should look at two key aspects of culture that are thoroughly implicated in the workings of social structure and social influence: values and norms.

Values

Perhaps no word in the English language carries more baggage than *values*. People throw around terms such as *moral values, traditional values, family values,* and *American values* with little thought as to what they actually mean. Sociologically speaking, a ***value*** is a standard of judgment by which people decide on desirable goals and outcomes (Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986). Values represent the general criteria on which our lives and the lives of others can be judged. They justify the social rules that determine how we ought to behave. For instance, laws against theft clearly reflect the value we place on personal property.

Different societies emphasize different values. Success, independence, and individual achievement are seen as important values in U.S. society. In other societies, such as Vietnam, people are more likely to value group obligation and loyalty to family.

Values within a society sometimes come into conflict. The value of privacy ("stay out of other people's business") and the value of generosity ("help others in need") may clash when we are trying to decide whether to help a stranger who seems to need assistance. Similarly, although the value of cooperation is held in high esteem in contemporary U.S. society, when someone is taking a final exam in a sociology class, cooperation is likely to be defined as cheating. When the key values that characterize a particular social institution come into conflict, the result may be widespread legal and moral uncertainty among individuals.

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION

Family Privacy Versus Children's Welfare

One such conflict involves the cultural value of family privacy. Contemporary U.S. life is built on the assumption that what a family does in the privacy of its home is, or at least should be, its own business. Family life, many people believe, is best left to family members, not to neighbors, the government, the courts, or other public agencies. Consequently, American families are endowed with significant autonomy—the right to make decisions about their future or about treatment of their members (see Chapter 7).

Privacy has not always characterized American families. Before the 19th century, people felt free to enter others' homes and tell them what to wear or how to treat their children. The

development of the value of family privacy and autonomy emerged with the separation of home and work and the growth of cities during the late 19th century (Parsons, 1971). Innovations in the amenities available within the home—indoor plumbing, refrigerators, telephones, radios, televisions, central air conditioning, and computers, for example—have all increased the privacy and isolation of American households. Our need to leave home for entertainment, goods, or services has been considerably reduced. Air conditioners, for instance, allow us to spend hot, stuffy summer evenings inside our own homes instead of on the front porch or at the local ice-cream parlor. With the Internet, fax machines, text messaging, and home-shopping cable networks, a family can survive without ever leaving the privacy of its home. The institution of family has become increasingly self-contained and private.

But the ability to maintain family privacy has always varied along social class lines. In poor households, dwellings are smaller and more crowded than more affluent homes, making privacy more difficult to obtain. Thin walls separating cramped apartments hide few secrets. Mandatory inspections by welfare caseworkers and housing authorities further diminish privacy. And poor families must often use public facilities (health clinics, Laundromats, public transportation, etc.) to carry out the day-to-day tasks that wealthier families can carry out privately.

Moreover, the value we place on the well-being of children can come into direct conflict at times with the value of family privacy. At what point should a state agency intervene and violate the privacy of the family to protect the welfare of a child? Does it better serve society's interests to protect family privacy or to protect children from harm?

Parents have never had complete freedom to do as they wish with their children. We're horrified at the thought of a parent beating his or her child to the point of injury or death. But we're equally horrified, it seems, at the thought of the state intruding on parents' right to raise or treat their children as they see fit. In the United States, parents have the legal right to direct the upbringing of their children, to determine the care they receive, and to use physical means to control their children's behavior. From a sociological perspective, injuring children can sometimes be the extreme outcome of the widely practiced and accepted belief that parents have the right to use physical punishment to discipline their children.

Concern with parents' privacy rights is often framed as a freedom of religion issue. Forty-eight states allow parents to refuse certain medical procedures for their children on religious grounds, such as immunizations, screenings for lead poisoning, and physical examinations (CHILD, 2009).

But it's unclear what ought to be done when parents' religious beliefs result in the injury or death of a child. Over the past 25 years, about 300 children have died after their parents decided to withhold medical care because of their religious beliefs (cited in Johnson, 2009). Thirty-nine states allow religion as a defense in cases of child abuse or neglect. Eighteen states permit religious defenses for felony crimes against children. Oregon, West Virginia, and Arkansas allow religious defenses in cases of murder.

Nevertheless, the government does sometimes violate the privacy of a family when that family's religious or cultural beliefs lead to the death or injury of a member. For instance, in 2009 an arrest warrant was issued for a Minnesota mother who disappeared with her 13-year-old cancer-stricken son after she refused to let him undergo chemotherapy. The boy had Hodgkin's lymphoma, a type of cancer that is considered highly curable with chemotherapy and radiation. After one treatment, the parents opted instead for "alternative medicines" because of their religious beliefs. But when an X-ray showed his tumor had grown, a judge ruled that the parents were medically neglecting their son, leading authorities to seek custody of the boy and leading the mother to flee.

Concern over increases in juvenile violence has led some cities and states to enact laws that punish parents for not properly supervising their children. Depending on the state, parental liability laws can hold parents responsible for their children's vandalism, theft, truancy, curfew violations, or illegal downloads (Sen, 2007). In 2005, a jury in Ohio determined that the parents of a 17-year-old boy who assaulted a young girl didn't do enough to stop him

and were therefore responsible for paying the victim 70% of the damages she was awarded ($7 million; Coolidge, 2005). In 2007, a Virginia couple was sentenced to 27 months in jail for hosting an underage drinking party for their child, even though no one was hurt at the party and no one drove (Deane, 2007). Such cases illustrate the profound effects of cultural and political values on the everyday lives of individuals. Situations such as these pit the privacy and autonomy of families against society's institutional responsibility to protect children and create new citizens.

Norms

Norms are culturally defined rules of conduct. They specify what people should do and how they should pursue values. They tell us what is proper or necessary behavior within particular roles, groups, organizations, and institutions. Thousands of norms guide the minor and the grand details of our lives, from the bedroom to the classroom to the boardroom. You can see, then, that norms serve as the fundamental building blocks of social order.

Norms make our interactions with others reasonably predictable. Americans expect that when they extend a hand to another person, that person will grasp it and a brief handshake will follow. They would be shocked if they held out their hand and the other person grabbed it and spit on it or wouldn't let go. In contrast, people in some societies commonly embrace or kiss each other's cheek as a form of greeting, even when involved in a formal business relationship. A hearty handshake in those societies may be interpreted as an insult. In Thailand, people greet each other by placing the palms of their hands together in front of their bodies and slightly bowing their heads. This greeting is governed by strict norms. Slight differences in the placement of one's hands reflect the social position of the other person—the higher the hands, the higher the position of the person being greeted. Norms like these make it easier to "live with others" in a relatively harmonious way (see Chapter 4).

Social Structure in a Global Context

A discussion of social structure would not be complete without acknowledging the fact that statuses, roles, groups, organizations, social institutions, and culture are sometimes influenced by broad societal and historical forces at work in the world. One such force with deep implications for contemporary society is ***globalization***, the process through which people's lives all around the world become increasingly interconnected—economically, politically, environmentally, and culturally (see Chapter 9 for more detail).

For instance, international financial institutions and foreign governments often provide money to support the building of hydroelectric dams in poor countries. According to the World Commission on Dams, 1,600 such dams in 40 countries were under construction in 2000 (Bald, 2000). These projects were meant to strengthen societies by providing additional energy sources in areas where power was dangerously deficient. However, they frequently transform individual lives, social institutions, and indigenous cultures in a negative way. A dam built along the Moon River in Thailand destroyed forests that for centuries were villagers' free source of food, firewood, and medicinal herbs. With the flooding created behind the dam, local farmers not only lost their farmland but also the value of their knowledge of farming methods developed

over centuries to adapt to the ebb and flow of the river. A multidam project along the Narmada River in India displaced over 200,000 people and led to violent protests there. The Manantali Dam in Mali destroyed the livelihood of downstream farmers and has resulted in the spread of waterborne diseases (Fountain, 2005). None of these dams would have been built without the funding and political clout of global financial organizations and foreign corporations.

Cultures have rarely been completely isolated from outside influence, because throughout human history people have been moving from one place to another, spreading goods and ideas. What is different today, though, is the speed and scope of these changes. Several decades ago, overnight mail service and direct long-distance telephone dialing increased the velocity of cross-national interaction. Advances in transportation technology have made international trade more cost-effective and international travel more accessible to ordinary citizens. And recently, the Internet has given people around the world instantaneous access to the cultural artifacts and ideals of other societies. Through search engines like Google, Yahoo!, and MSN Search, children in Beijing, Beirut, or Baltimore can easily and immediately mine unlimited amounts of the same information on every conceivable topic.

Clearly, societies are more interdependent than ever, and that interdependence matters for individuals around the world. Sometimes the effects are positive. Pharmaceutical breakthroughs in the United States or Europe, for instance, can save lives around the world. Globalization gives us a chance to learn about other societies and learn from them. Other times, however, global influence can have disastrous consequences. Many of today's most pressing societal problems—widespread environmental devastation, large- and small-scale wars, economic crises, viral epidemics, and so on—are a function of globalization to some degree. Closer to home, the establishment of a toy factory in Southeast Asia or a clothing factory in Mexico may mean the loss of hundreds of manufacturing jobs in Kentucky or California.

In short, it is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to consider ourselves members of a single society unaffected by other societies. All of us are simultaneously members of our own society and citizens of a world community.

(Text continues on page 44)

Three Perspectives on Social Order

The question of what holds all these elements of society together and how they combine to create social order has concerned sociologists for decades. Sociologists identify three broad intellectual orientations they often use to address this question: the structural-functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective, and symbolic interactionism (see Exhibit 2.2). Each of these perspectives has its advantages and shortcomings. Each is helpful in answering particular types of questions. For instance, structural functionalism is useful in showing us how and why large, macrolevel structures, such as organizations and institutions, develop and persist. The conflict perspective sheds light on the various sources of social inequality that exist in this and other societies. And symbolic interactionism is helpful in explaining how individuals construct meaning to make sense of their social surroundings. At times, the perspectives complement one another; at other times, they contradict one another.

Throughout the remaining chapters of this book, I will periodically return to these three perspectives—as well as several other specific perspectives—to apply them to specific social phenomena, experiences, and events.

The Structural-Functionalist Perspective

According to sociologists Talcott Parsons and Neil Smelser (1956), two theorists typically associated with the ***structural-functionalist perspective***, a society is a complex system composed of various parts, much like a living organism. Just as the heart, lungs, and liver work together to keep an animal alive, so too do all the elements of a society's structure work together to keep society alive.

Social institutions play a key role in keeping a society stable. All societies require certain things to survive. They must ensure that the goods and services people need are produced and distributed; they must provide ways of dealing with conflicts between individuals, groups, and organizations; they must provide ways to ensure that individuals are made a part of the existing culture.

Exhibit 2.2 Sociological Perspectives at a Glance

Sociological Perspective	*Key Concepts*	*Main Assumption*
Structural-functionalist perspective	Manifest and latent functions Dysfunctions Social stability	Social institutions are structured to maintain stability and order in society
Conflict perspective	Power Inequality Conflict Dominance	The various institutions in society promote inequality and conflict among groups of people
Symbolic interactionist perspective	Symbolic communication Social interaction Subjective meaning	Society is structured and maintained through everyday interactions and people's subjective definitions of their worlds

As we saw earlier in this chapter, institutions allow societies to attain their goals, adapt to a changing environment, reduce tension, and recruit individuals into statuses and roles. Economic institutions, for instance, allow adaptation to dwindling supplies of natural resources or to competition from other societies. Educational institutions train people for the future statuses they will have to fill to keep society going. Religions help maintain the existence of society by reaffirming people's values and maintaining social ties among people (Durkheim, 1915/1954).

Sociologist Robert Merton (1957) distinguishes between manifest and latent functions of social institutions. ***Manifest functions*** are the intended, obvious consequences of activities designed to help some part of the social system. For instance, the manifest function of going to college is to get an education and acquire the credentials necessary to establish a career. ***Latent functions*** are the *unintended,* sometimes unrecognized, consequences of actions that coincidentally help the system. The latent function of going to college is to meet people and establish close, enduring friendships. In addition, college informally teaches students how to live on their own, away from their parents. It also provides important lessons in negotiating the intricacies of large bureaucracies—registering for classes, filling out forms, learning important school policies—so that students figure out how to "get things done" in an organization. These latent lessons will certainly help students who enter the equally large and bureaucratic world of work after they graduate (Galles, 1989).

From the structural-functionalist perspective, if an aspect of social life does not contribute to society's survival—that is, if it is *dys*functional—it will eventually disappear. Things that persist, even if they seem to be disruptive, must persist because they contribute somehow to the survival of society (Durkheim, 1915/1954). Take prostitution, for example. A practice so widely condemned and punished would appear to be dysfunctional for society. But prostitution has existed since human civilization began. Some structural functionalists suggest that prostitution satisfies sexual needs that may not be met through more socially acceptable means, such as marriage. Customers can have their physical desires satisfied without having to establish the sort of emotional attachment to another person that would destroy a preexisting marriage, harm the institution of family, and ultimately threaten the entire society (Davis, 1937).

Structural functionalism was the dominant theoretical tradition in sociology for most of the 20th century, and it still shapes sociological thinking to a certain degree today. But it has been criticized for accepting existing social arrangements without examining how they might exploit or otherwise disadvantage certain groups or individuals within the society.

The Conflict Perspective

The ***conflict perspective*** addresses the deficiencies of structural functionalism by viewing the structure of society as a source of inequality, which benefits some groups at the expense of other groups. Conflict sociologists are likely to see society not in terms of stability and acceptance but in terms of conflict and struggle. They focus not on how all the elements of society contribute to its smooth operation and continued existence but on how these elements promote divisions and inequalities. Social order arises not from the societal pursuit of harmony but from dominance and coercion. The family, government, religion, and other institutions foster and legitimate the power and privilege of some individuals or groups at the expense of others.

Karl Marx, perhaps the most famous scholar associated with the conflict perspective, focused exclusively on economic arrangements. He argued that all human societies are structured around the production of goods that people need to survive. The individuals or groups who control the means of production—land in an agricultural society, factories in an industrial society, computer networks and information in a postindustrial society—have the power to create and maintain social institutions that serve their interests. Hence, economic, political, and educational systems in a modern society support the interests of those who control the wealth (see Chapter 10).

Marx believed that when resources are limited or scarce, conflict between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is inevitable and creates a situation in which those in power must enforce social order. He said this conflict is not caused by greedy, exploitative individuals; rather, it is a byproduct of a system in which those who benefit from inequality are motivated to act in ways that maintain it.

Contemporary conflict sociologists are interested in various sources of conflict and inequality. One version of the conflict perspective that has become particularly popular among sociologists in the past few decades is the ***feminist perspective.*** Feminist sociologists focus on gender as the most important source of conflict and inequality in social life: Compared with men, women in nearly every contemporary society have less power, influence, and opportunity. In families, especially in industrialized societies, women have traditionally been encouraged to perform unpaid household labor and child care duties, whereas men have been free to devote their energy and attention to earning money and power in the economic marketplace. Women's lower wages when they do work outside the home are often justified by the assumption that their paid labor is secondary to that of their husbands. But as women in many societies seek equality in education, politics, career, marriage, and other areas of social life, their activities inevitably affect social institutions (see Chapter 12 for more details). The feminist perspective helps us understand the difficulties men and women face in their everyday lives as they experience the changes taking place in society.

Because this perspective focuses so much on conflict, it tends to downplay or overlook the elements of society that different groups and individuals share. In addition, its emphasis on inequality has led some critics to argue that it is a perspective motivated by a particular political agenda and not the objective pursuit of knowledge.

Symbolic Interactionism

The structural-functionalist and the conflict perspectives differ in their assumptions about the nature of society, yet both analyze society mostly at the macro- or structural level, focusing on societal patterns and the consequences they produce. In contrast, ***symbolic interactionism*** attempts to understand society and social structure through an examination of the microlevel interactions of people as individuals, pairs, or groups.

These forms of interaction take place within a world of symbolic communication. A ***symbol*** is something used to represent or stand for something else (Charon, 1998). It can be a physical object (like an engagement ring, standing for betrothal), a characteristic or property of objects (like the pink color of a triangle, standing for gay rights), a gesture (like a thumb pointed up, standing for "everything's OK"), or a word (like the letters d-o-g, standing for a particular type of household pet).

Symbols are created, modified, and used by people through their interactions with others. We concoct them and come to agree on what they should stand for. Our lives depend on such agreement. For instance, imagine how chaotic—not to mention dangerous—automobile travel would be if we didn't all agree that green stands for go and red stands for stop.

Symbols don't bear any necessary connection to nature. Rather, they're arbitrary human creations. There's nothing in the natural properties of "greenness" that automatically determines that green should stand for "go." We could have decided long ago that purple meant go. It wouldn't have mattered as long as we all learned and understood this symbol.

Most human behavior is determined not by the objective facts of a given situation but by the symbolic meanings people attach to the facts (Weber, 1947). When we interact with others, we constantly attempt to interpret what they mean and what they're up to. A gentle pat on the shoulder symbolizes one thing if it comes from someone with whom you are romantically involved but something quite different if it comes from your mother or your boss.

Society, therefore, is not a structure that exists independent of human action. It is "socially constructed," emerging from the countless symbolic interactions that occur each day between individuals. Each time I refer to "U.S. society," "the school system," "the global economy," "the threat of terrorism," or "the Newman family" in my casual conversations with others, I am doing my part to reinforce the notion that these are real things. By examining how and why we interact with others, symbolic interactionism reveals how the everyday experiences of people help to construct and maintain social institutions and, ultimately, society itself.

This perspective reminds us that for all its structural elements society is, in the end, people interacting with one another. But by highlighting these microlevel experiences, symbolic interactionism runs the risk of ignoring the larger social patterns and structures that create the influential historical, institutional, and cultural settings for people's everyday interactions.

Conclusion

Living with others, within a social structure, influences many aspects of our everyday lives. But we must be cautious not to overstate the case. Although the fundamental elements of society are not merely the direct expressions of the personalities of individuals, we must also remember that people are more than "robots programmed by social structure" (Swanson, 1992, p. 94).

The lesson I hope you take from this chapter—and, in fact, from this book—is that the relationship between the individual and society is reciprocal. One cannot be understood without accounting for the other. Yes, this thing we call "society" touches our lives in intimate, important, and sometimes not altogether obvious ways. And yes, this influence is often beyond our immediate control. But society is not simply a "forbidding prison" that mechanically determines who we are and what we do (Berger, 1963). We as individuals can affect the very social structure that affects us. We can modify role expectations, change norms, create or destroy organizations, revolutionize institutions, and even alter the path of world history.