the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine—something most infants in this country routinely receive—had probably given her son autism. Rather than provide research evidence (principally because there really is none), McCarthy based her conclusion on her own intuition—what she called "mommy instinct"—and information she'd picked up on the Internet (she once proudly proclaimed, "The University of Google is where I got my degree from"; quoted in Achenbach, 2015, p. 5). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute of Medicine, the Autism Science Foundation, and the National Academy of Sciences have all concluded there is no link between vaccines and autism. Nevertheless, the contention that vaccines could harm children struck an emotional chord with many fretful parents. Consequently in some states the percentage of children who get this vaccine as well as other vaccines has consistently dropped over the past several years. Perhaps not coincidentally, measles cases are on the rise. In 2007 there were about 50 confirmed cases of measles in the United States. In 2014, there were over 600 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014c). The vast majority of these cases were in persons who were unvaccinated. As a result, in 2015, California became the first state to require parents to vaccinate their children, regardless of personal or religious opposition.

Such precarious uses of truth may appear foolish or even deceitful. Yet much of our everyday knowledge is based on accepting as real the existence of things that can't be seen, touched, or proved—"the world taken-for-granted" (P. L. Berger, 1963, p. 147). Like Virginia, we learn to accept the existence of things such as electrons, the ozone layer, black holes in the universe, love, and God, even though we cannot see them. And like Jenny McCarthy, we learn to accept unsubstantiated conclusions as long as they support our interests.

How do we come to know what we know? How do we learn what is real and what isn't? In this chapter, I examine how sociologists discover truths about human life. But to provide the appropriate context, I must first present a sociological perspective on the nature of reality. How do individuals construct their realities? How do societal forces influence the process?

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

In Chapter 2, I noted that the elements of society are human creations that provide structure to our everyday lives. They also give us a distinctive lens through which we perceive the world. For example, because of their different statuses and their respective occupational training, an architect, a real estate agent, a police officer, and a firefighter can each look at the same building and see very different things: "a beautiful example of early Victorian architecture," "a moderately priced fixer-upper," "an easy target for a thief," or "a dangerous fire hazard." Mark Twain often wrote about how the Mississippi River—a waterway he saw every day as a child—looked different after he became a riverboat pilot. What he once saw as a place for fun and relaxation, he later saw for its treacherous currents, eddies, and other potential perils.

What we know to be true or real is always a product of the culture and historical period in which we exist. It takes an exercise of the sociological imagination, however, to see that what we ourselves "know" to be true today—the laws of nature, the causes and treatments of certain diseases, and so forth—may not be true for everyone everywhere or may be replaced by different truths tomorrow (Babbie, 1986). For example, in some cultures, the existence of spirits, witches, and demons is a taken-for-granted part of everyday reality that others might easily dismiss as fanciful. On the other side of the coin, the Western faith in the curative powers of little pills—without the intervention of spiritual forces—might seem far-fetched and naïve to people living in cultures where illness and health are assumed to have supernatural causes.