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TAKING A NEW LOOK AT A FAMILIAR WORLD

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André graduated from college in 2019. 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 4 years, and he graduated Phi Beta Kappa. As a computer science major with a minor in economics, André thought his future was set: 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 by taking temporary freelance programming jobs here and there and working nights at the Gap. Although most of his classmates had similar difficulties finding jobs, André began to question his own abilities: "Do I lack the skills employers are looking for? Am I not trying hard enough? What the heck is wrong with me?" His friends and family were as encouraging as they could be, but some secretly wondered if André wasn't as smart as they'd thought he was.

Michael and Grace were both juniors at a large university. They had been dating each other exclusively for the past 2 years. By all accounts, the relationship seemed to be going quite well. In fact, Michael was beginning to think about marriage, children, and living happily ever after. Then one day out of the blue, Grace dropped a bombshell. She texted Michael that 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? Tell me. 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.

Even though he let his friends talk him into immediately changing his relationship status on Facebook, Michael was devastated. They tried to comfort him. "She wasn't any good for you anyway," they said. "We always thought she was a little creepy. 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 how people immediately try to explain an unfortunate situation by focusing on the personal characteristics and attributes of the individuals involved. André blames himself for not being able to land a job in his field; others, although supportive, harbor doubts about his intelligence and drive. Michael wonders what he did to sour his relationship with Grace; his friends question Grace's psychological stability. Such reactions are not uncommon. We have a marked tendency to rely on **individualistic explanations**, attributing people's achievements and disappointments to their personal qualities.

So why can't André, our highly intelligent, well-trained, talented college graduate, find a permanent job? It's certainly possible that he has some personal flaw that makes him unemployable: lack of motivation, laziness, negative attitude, bad hygiene, a snooty demeanor, and so on. Or maybe he just doesn't come across as particularly smart during job interviews.

But by focusing exclusively on such individual "deficiencies," we risk overlooking the broader societal factors that may have affected André's job prospects. For instance, the employment situation for college graduates like André was part of a broader economic trend that began with the global financial crisis of 2008 and continued to suppress the job market by the time he got his degree. At the time I was writing this chapter, 3.8% of American adults (about 6.2 million people) were officially unemployed, and about 21% of them had been unemployed for at least 27 weeks. Incidentally, the official unemployment rate only counts people who have been actively seeking employment for the past month. Thus it doesn't include the 4.5 million people who were employed part time even though they wanted to work full time, the 1.4 million "marginally attached" unemployed people who had looked for a job sometime in the past year (just not in the past month), and the 412,000 "discouraged" workers who had lost hope and given up looking for employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019b). So you see, even though the unemployment rate is lower than it was, say, 10 years ago, a lot of people remain in André's boat.

But he's got a college education. That should help, right? Well, it turns out that college degrees are not necessarily a guarantee of fruitful employment. Even though the economy has been strong over the past few years and the job prospects for young graduates have begun to brighten, the unemployment rate for new college graduates is higher than it is for the general population and has remained fairly stable over the past decade: 5.6% today compared with 5.5% in 2007 (the year prior to the Great Recession). In addition, the *underemployment* rate (that is, the proportion of graduates working in jobs that don't require a college degree) remains higher than it was prior to the Great Recession (11.9% compared to 9.6% in 2008) and much higher than it was in 2000 (7.1%). And 1 out of 10 recent college graduates is neither employed nor pursuing more education in graduate or professional school (Kroeger & Gould, 2017).

The news for people like André is not all bad, though. New graduates do fare better than other young people who don't have college degree. For instance, people who are over 25 and have never attended college earn, on average, \$739 a week; college graduates earn an average of \$1,350 a week (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019h).

However, starting salaries for college graduates have stagnated in recent years. In fact, the average wages for young college graduates are only 1.4% higher than they were in 2000. Just 25% of employed college graduates work in a job that provides retirement or pension benefits (Kroeger & Gould, 2017). To make money matters worse, 44.7 million Americans have student loan debt. Those who graduated in 2018 carry an average debt of \$29,800. In fact, Americans owe \$521 billion *more* in student loan debt than the total U.S. credit card debt (Student Loan Hero, 2019). As a consequence, one recent survey found that 35% of college graduates now consider themselves working or lower class, compared to only 20% in 1983. Over that same period of time, the percentage of graduates who consider themselves middle or upper class has dropped from 80% to 64% (Boak & Swanson, 2019).

So you see, André's employability in his chosen field 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 10 years earlier—during the Great Recession, when the unemployment rate hovered around 10%—his job prospects would have been much worse. But had he graduated 2 or 3 years later—when employment opportunities are projected to improve even more for graduates in his field—his prospects would have been much brighter.

And what about Michael and Grace? 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 successes or failures based solely on the traits or actions of the two people involved.

But how would your assessment of the situation change if you found out that Lee—to whom Grace had always been secretly attracted—had just broken up with his longtime girlfriend, Julie, and was now available? Like it or not, relationships are not exclusively private entities; they're always being influenced by forces beyond our control. They take place within a larger network of friends, acquaintances, ex-partners, coworkers, fellow students, and people as yet unknown who may make desirable or, at the very least, acceptable dating partners. On social media, people routinely post up-to-the-minute changes in the status of their relationships, thereby instantaneously advertising shifts in their availability.

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, or 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, Grace's decision to leave could have been indirectly affected by the sheer number of potentially obtainable partners—a result of shifts in the birthrate 20 years or so earlier. There are roughly 126 U.S. men between 25 and 34 who are single, divorced, or widowed for every 100 women in the same categories (K. Parker, Wang, & Rohal, 2014). For a single, heterosexual woman like Grace, such a surplus of college-age men increases the likelihood that she would eventually find a better alternative to Michael. Fifty years ago, however, when there were 180 single men for every 100 single women, her chances would have been even better. The number of available alternatives can also vary geographically. For instance, Michael's prospects would improve if he were living in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where there are 72 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women, but his chances would sink if he lived in Mansfield, Ohio, where there are 215 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends, 2014). In sum, Michael's interpersonal value, and therefore the stability of his relationship with Grace, 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 Grace 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 (hairstyle, physique, clothing), behaviors (smoking, drinking, sharing feelings), or life choices (educational attainment, occupation, political affiliation) more or less attractive. And broad economic forces can affect intimate choices even further. In China, where there are about 41 million more unmarried young men than women (Tsai, 2012a), single women can be especially choosy when it comes to romantic partners, often requiring that suitors be employed and own their own homes before they'll even consider them for a date (Jacobs, 2011).

The moral of these two stories is simple: To understand experiences in our personal lives, we must move past individual traits and examine broader societal characteristics and trends. External features beyond our immediate awareness and control often exert as much influence on the circumstances of our day-to-day lives as 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, believe the things they believe, or do the things they do, we must understand the interpersonal, historical, cultural, technological, 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 character, the psychology, or even the biochemistry of each person. 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, what to wear when we go out, what and when to eat, who our mates will be, 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. Gender profoundly affects your choices, too. Some occupations, such as bank executive and engineer, are still overwhelmingly male, whereas others, such as registered nurse and preschool teacher, are almost exclusively female. Likewise, the doctrines of your religion may limit your behavioral choices. For a devout Catholic, premarital sex or even divorce is unlikely. Each day during the holy month of Ramadan, a strict Muslim must abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. An Orthodox Jew would never dream of drinking milk and eating meat at the same meal. Even universal bodily needs can be influenced by our social context.

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION

A SOCIOLOGY OF SLEEP

Everybody sleeps. At certain moments in our lives—when we've pulled an all-nighter studying for finals, when we're congested and feverish, when we become new parents—sleep may be the most all-encompassing preoccupation we have. Indeed, one of the major ailments of modern life is lack of sleep. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017b), chronic insomnia afflicts about 40 million Americans. In the United States alone, there are over 2,000 sleep clinics to treat people's sleep problems. "Fatigue management" is now a growing therapeutic field (cited in Kolbert, 2013).

Sleep is obviously experienced differently by different individuals. I'm sure you know people who say they can't

function on less than 10 hours of sleep a night while others say they're wide-awake and perky on just 4 hours.

But sleep preferences are not just a matter of individual adaptation and life choices. Some of the most important indicators for poor sleep in the United States are low income, shift work, food insecurity, and the stress that comes with being African American or Latino/a (Heller, 2018). The highest rates of short sleep duration (that is, the number of people who get less than 7 hours of sleep a night) can be found in states with high rates of economic instability such as Kentucky, Mississippi, West Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017b).

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And sleep takes on different meanings at different stages of our lives. Children, for example, typically require much more sleep than adults, especially in their first several years of life. Even here, though, individual needs can be overridden by broader social and interpersonal concerns. A major accomplishment of parenting is getting children to fit their sleeping patterns into the parents' schedule. "My baby slept through the night last night!" is a celebratory exclamation all new parents long to shout. But it's not always easy. What parent hasn't experienced the struggle of trying to get a fussy baby or combative toddler to sleep at night? But parent-child conflict over sleep never completely disappears. Try waking up a surly teenager on a school day morning sometime. Incidentally, the problem of dozy teenagers has become so bad that the American Academy of Pediatrics (2014) issued a policy statement a few years back recommending a later start of the school day in middle and high school so that teens can get enough sleep at night.

According to sociologist Simon Williams (2011a), sleep is "a window onto the social world" (p. 27). How, when, where, how much, and with whom we sleep is always a product of social, cultural, historical, and even economic forces. For homeless people on the streets of Delhi, India, for instance, finding some way and somewhere to sleep is a nightly struggle: "The bicycle rickshaw pullers . . . fold their bodies into strange angles on the four-foot seats of their vehicles. The day laborers curl their bodies on the frigid sidewalk, sometimes spooned against other men for warmth" (E. Barry, 2016, p. A6). With so many people in such desperate need of sleep, dishonest vendors—what the locals call the "sleep mafia"—sell filthy blankets to those who can scarcely afford food, jacking up their prices when the temperature drops. Essentially, these individuals decide who sleeps where, how well they sleep, and for how long.

All societies must organize the sleep of their members in some way. Think about when and where it's appropriate to sleep. At night? Obviously. In the privacy of your own home? Of course. American adults are expected to go to sleep somewhere around 11 at night and wake up around 7 in the morning—what one anthropologist refers to as "consolidated sleeping" (Wolf-Meyer, 2012). Anything else—"sleeping during the day, sleeping in bursts, waking up in the middle of the night"—is considered unsound, even abnormal, and perhaps subject to some kind of therapeutic intervention (Kolbert, 2013, p. 25).

At times, going without sleep can be worn as a boastful badge of honor or pride. "If you snooze, you lose," "I'll have time to sleep when I'm dead," and all that. The author Vladimir Nabokov once wrote: "No matter how great my weariness, the wrench of parting with consciousness is unspeakably repulsive" (quoted in Heller, 2018, p. 25). But this self-satisfaction clearly can be taken too far. "Drowsiness . . . is increasingly regarded as the new drunkenness: a culpable state, since, we are every bit as dangerous behind the wheel when we're drowsy as when we are drunk" (S. Williams,

2011a, pp. 27–28). According to the National Safety Council (2019), every year about 100,000 police-reported crashes involve drowsy driving. These crashes result in more than 1,550 deaths and 71,000 injuries.

We tend to believe that "lying unconscious for eight hours straight [belongs] to a natural order" (Barron, 2016, p. 27). But the "8 hours of sleep a night" ideal has not always characterized people's lives. Up until the mid-19th century, it was common for people to sleep in segments throughout the day. They may have gone to bed in the later afternoon or early evening, slept for several hours, woken up and engaged in a few hours of activity—what the French referred to as *dorveille*, or "wake-sleep"—then gone to bed for a "second sleep." In some societies, periods of daytime sleep are a common part of the culture. The *siesta* in some Mediterranean countries and the mid-day rest in some Asian societies are held as acceptable, even valued, practices.

However, such a pattern was not (and today is not) conducive to a complex, global world that hinges on employment and profit. For years, the taken-for-granted 9-to-5 workday and Monday-through-Friday workweek have had a significant impact on how we divide and define time. Most of us can easily make distinctions between workdays and non-workdays (holidays and weekends), between work hours and rest hours. And it's pretty clear in which of these times sleep is considered appropriate.

Yet the boundary between work (wakefulness) and home (sleep) is not always so clear. In certain occupations that involve the operation of heavy machinery—like long-distance truckers, train conductors, and airplane pilots—tired workers pose obvious safety hazards. Hence they have mandatory downtime policies and work-hour limitations. But as the pace of life has sped up, even office-based, nonmanual occupations are facing the problem of worker fatigue due to lack of sleep. It's estimated that drowsiness costs the U.S. economy hundreds of billions of dollars each year in higher stress and lost productivity (Baxter & Kroll-Smith, 2005). One third of respondents in one poll indicated that they'd fallen asleep at work in the previous month (National Sleep Foundation, 2008).

Some sociologists have argued that recent changes in the workplace—flexible schedules, telecommuting, home-based work—have begun to blur the time-honored boundaries between public and private, work and home, and given rise to shifting conceptions of sleep. In particular, they cite the greater acceptability of the workplace nap as evidence of changing attitudes toward sleep and wakefulness: "Once a taboo act engaged in by those who knew they were violating company rules, workplace napping is emerging, albeit unevenly, in American work culture as a tolerated, if not prescribed, behavior" (Baxter & Kroll-Smith, 2005, p. 34). More and more companies have come to the conclusion that restorative naps are a relatively cheap solution to the problem of excessive drowsiness.

Many now provide nap rooms (or serenity rooms) for their employees, where they can find comfortable sofas, soothing lighting, and enforced bans on tablet and smart-phone usage.

We're not yet to the point where *all* American employees have opportunities to take periodic power naps at work. We're not in danger of becoming a *siesta* culture

anytime soon. However, I hope you can now see that "the very places, spaces [and] schedules . . . of sleep are themselves deeply social, cultural, historical, and political matters—and potentially subject to contestation and change" (S. Williams, 2011a, p. 31). Even in something so natural as sleep, society interacts with the individual to shape the experience.

Then there's the matter of personal style—your choices in hairstyle, dress, music, videos, and the like. Large-scale marketing strategies can actually create a demand for particular products or images. Your tastes, and therefore your choices as a consumer, are often influenced by decisions made in far-off corporate boardrooms. Would Ariana Grande, Post Malone, Taylor Swift, or Cardi B have become as popular as they are without a tightly managed and slickly packaged publicity program designed to appeal to adolescents and preadolescents? One California company called Jukin Media is the leader in a new industry that determines whether your web video will go viral. Once its researchers determine that a video of, say, a baby tasting lemons for the first time or dogs and parakeets becoming friends is good enough, the company contacts the clip's owner and purchases the licensing rights. Then it's just a matter of time before the video is splashed all over the Internet, becoming what millions of us think is the month's hot new meme (Kelles, 2017).

National and international economic trends also affect your everyday life. You may lose your job or, like André, face a tight job market as a result of economic fluctuations brought about by increased global competition or the lingering effects of a severe recession. Or, because of the rapid development of certain types of technology, the college degree that may be your ticket to a rewarding career today may not qualify you even for a low-paying, entry-level position 10 years from now. In one poll, 75% of young adults who dropped out of college cited the financial need to work full time as the principal reason why it would be hard for them to go back to school (Lewin, 2009). And if you finish your degree but don't get a good job right out of college, you may have to move back home—like one third of people in their 20s and 30s these days (Fry, 2016a)—and live there for years after you graduate, not because you can't face the idea of living apart from your beloved parents but because you can't earn enough money to support yourself. In fact, by 2014, for the first time in 130 years, more adults in this age group were living with their parents than were living with a spouse or partner in their own household.

Moving in with one's parents has a variety of consequences aside from just living under the same roof. In one poll, the majority of parents said they were involved in their adult children's lives on a daily basis. Such involvement included making appointments for them, reminding them of deadlines, offering advice on their romantic lives, or giving them financial assistance (cited in Queally & Miller, 2019). If you think all this is troubling, consider what it's like in Slovakia, where 74% of 18- to 34-year-olds live with their parents, regardless of employment or marital status (Lyman, 2015).

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 more expensive or less available, or reduce the size of your paycheck after taxes are taken out. Workplace family-leave policies or health insurance regulations established by the government may affect your decision whether and when to have a baby or to undergo the elective surgery you've been putting off. If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, the federal and state governments can determine whether you can be fired from your job simply because of your sexual orientation. In the United States, decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court can increase or limit your ability to control your fertility, sue

an employer for discrimination, use your property however you please, carry a concealed weapon in public, legally marry, or keep the details of your life a private matter.

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

- In 2011, a massive earthquake and deadly tsunami crippled many Japanese companies that manufacture car parts, resulting in a drop in automobile production in U.S. plants. That same year, violent protests in Arab countries like Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen sparked fears of reduced oil imports and drove U.S. gasoline prices up over \$4 a gallon.
- In the fall of 2014, an outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in several West African countries grabbed the world's attention. There were over 20,000 documented cases in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone and about 8,000 deaths. In the United States, there were four cases and one death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015b). But even though the risk of contracting this disease in the United States is exceedingly low, one fifth of Americans worry about getting it (Gallup, 2014). Immediately following the outbreak in West Africa, the Department of Homeland Security implemented restrictions on travel to these countries and imposed elevated screening for passengers arriving from them. Anxieties grew. A train station in Dallas was shut down when a passenger was reported to have vomited on the platform. A cruise ship was blocked from docking in Mexico because a passenger worked in the Texas hospital where an Ebola patient had died. Schools were shut down when it was suspected that an employee might have been on the same plane as an Ebola patient. Experts feared that the entire international business travel industry could suffer huge financial losses (Sharkey, 2014).
- Similarly, in 2016, fear of the Zika outbreak—a virus that has been linked in several Latin American countries to babies born with microcephaly (a severe reduction in the size of a child's head)—affected some U.S. women's decisions to become pregnant. Some people in Florida, where there had been some reports of Zika cases, were simply too afraid to leave their homes.
- Between 2015 and 2019, ISIS attacks killed several hundred people in France, Belgium, Turkey, England, Australia, Sri Lanka, and other places around the world. Following each attack, many cities in the United States heightened police security in popular public venues. In fact, terrorist attacks in foreign countries routinely result in travel restrictions and increased safety measures here.

These are only some of the ways in which events in the larger world can affect individual lives. Can you think of others?

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 individuals make sense of their private lives and the social worlds they occupy? How does everyday social interaction create “society”?

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

- A 14-year-old 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.
- 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 all have terrible personal problems that have made their lives suck. If you saw them only for what they’ve become—the “anorexic,” the “homeless person,” or the “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 exalts lean bodies, values individual achievement and economic success, and encourages drinking to excess. 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 overcome their wretched childhoods, others withstand the tragedy of economic failure and begin anew, and some are immune to narrowly defined cultural images of beauty. But to understand fully the nature of human life or of particular social problems, we must acknowledge the broader social context in which these things occur.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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

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

Getting fired, for example, is a terrible, even traumatic, private experience. Feelings of personal failure are inevitable when one loses a job. But would your feelings of failure differ if you lived in Ames, Iowa—where the unemployment rate is 1.4%—versus El Centro, California—where the rate is 17% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019c)? If yes, then we must see unemployment not as a personal malfunction but as a social problem that has its roots in the economic and political structures of society. Listen to how one columnist described his job loss:

Five years ago, when the magazine dismissed me, fewer Americans were unemployed than are now, and I felt like a solitary reject in a nation of comfortable successes. . . . If I were to get the same news now, in an era of mass layoffs and major bankruptcies, I wonder if I would suffer as I did then. . . . Maybe I would just shrug instead and head outside for a relaxing bike ride. (Kirn, 2009, p. 13)

Such an easygoing response to being fired is probably uncommon. Nevertheless, his point is important sociologically: Being unemployed is not a character flaw or personal failure if a significant number of people in one's community are also unemployed. We can't explain a spike in the unemployment rate as a sudden increase in the number of incompetent or unprepared individual workers in the labor force. As long as the economy is arranged so that employees are easily replaced or slumps inevitably occur, the social problem of unemployment cannot be solved at the personal level.

The same can be said for divorce, which people usually experience as an intimate tragedy. But in the United States, it's estimated that 4 out of every 10 marriages that begin this year will eventually end in divorce. And divorce rates are increasing dramatically 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 spouses are suddenly being nicer to each other.

Mills did not mean to imply that the sociological imagination should debilitate us—that is, force us to powerlessly perceive our lives as wholly beyond our control. In fact, the opposite is true. An awareness of the impact of social forces or world history on our personal lives is a prerequisite to any efforts we make to change our social circumstances.

Indeed, the sociological imagination allows us to recognize that the solutions to many of our most serious social problems lie not in changing the personal situations and characteristics of individual people but in changing the social institutions and roles available to them (C. W. Mills, 1959). Drug addiction, homelessness, sexual violence, hate crimes, eating disorders, suicide, and other unfortunate situations will not go away simply by treating or punishing a person who is suffering from or engaging in the behavior.

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

As 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. They 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 they heard he didn't get into the fraternity he wanted or that he was a bit of a loner. In other words, something was wrong with *him*.

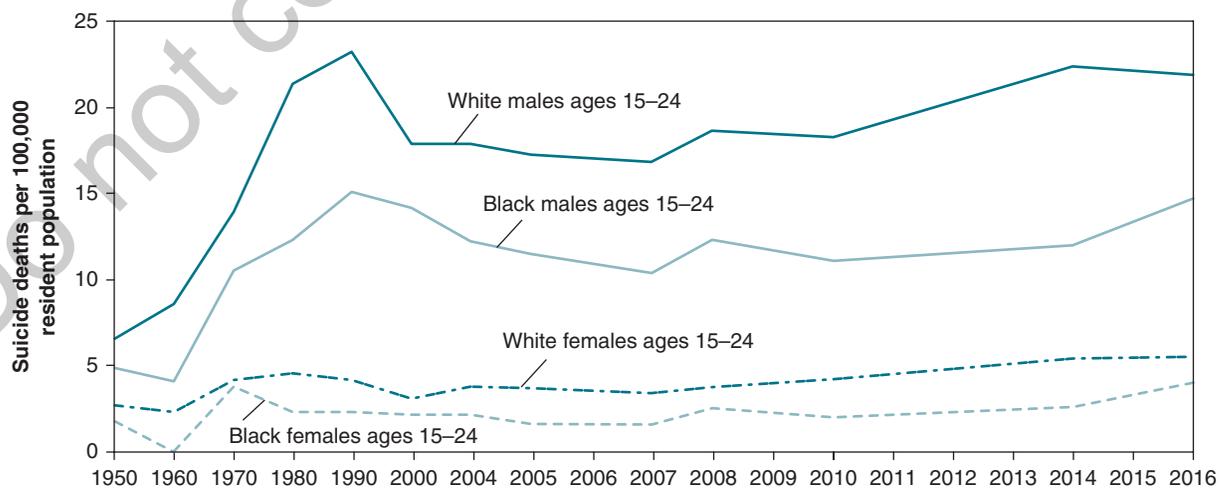
As heartbreaking as this incident was, it was far from unique. Between 1950 and 2016, the U.S. suicide rate more than tripled for people between the ages of 15 and 24 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2017). In fact, the suicide rate for 10- to 14-year-olds has tripled since 2000 (S. C. Curtin, Warner, & Hedegaard, 2016). Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 5- to 14-year-olds—following accidents and malignant tumors—and second leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds. In 2015, 17.7% of U.S. high school students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the previous year (National Center for Health Statistics, 2017).

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 accomplishment—being well dressed, popular, and successful—more strongly than ever before. Young people face almost constant pressure to “measure up” and define their identities, and therefore their self-worth, according to standards set by others (Mannon, 1997). Although most adjust pretty well, others can't. In addition, as competition for scarce financial resources becomes more acute, young people are likely to experience heightened levels of stress and confusion about their own futures. To some, expectations regarding educational success have spun out of control, resulting in a national school-related stress epidemic. As one teacher put it, “We are sitting on a ticking time bomb” (quoted in Abeles, 2016, p. 2). When the quest for success begins earlier and earlier, the costs of not succeeding increase. Media depictions of youthful angst can exacerbate the problem. For instance, a recent study found that in the month following the 2017 release of the Netflix show *13 Reasons Why*, there was a 29% increase in suicide rates among 10- to 17-year-olds (Bridge et al., 2019).

Growing educational expectations 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, tripled from 4.1 deaths per 100,000 people in 1960 to 14.7 deaths in 2016 (see Exhibit 1.1). Some experts have blamed these trends on a growing sense of hopelessness and

EXHIBIT 1.1 ■ What Effect Do Race and Gender Have on Young People's Desire to Commit Suicide?



Source: National Center for Health Statistics (2017, Table 30).

a long-standing cultural taboo against discussing mental health matters. Others, however, have cited broader social factors, brought about, ironically, by the growing economy of the late 20th century and the more recent recovery from the 2008 recession. As more and more Black families move into the middle class, they feel increasing pressure to compete in traditionally White-dominated professions and social environments.

You'll also notice in Exhibit 1.1 that the suicide rates of both black and white young women has consistently been lower than those of young men. Can you think of a sociological reason to account for this fact? Is it less stressful being a teenage girl than a teenage boy in this society?

In other societies, different types of social changes may account for fluctuations in suicide rates. For instance, South Korea has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world (27 per 100,000; World Population Review, 2019), nearly 80% greater than that of the United States. South Korea has achieved phenomenal growth since World War II, transforming from a poor rural country to one of the world's most thriving economies. But with economic success comes economic pressure. Twenty years ago, South Korea experienced a major financial crash. Since then, fear of another crash has intensified workplace stress. According to the South Korean Health and Welfare Ministry, 90% of South Koreans who commit suicide suffer from stress-related conditions. In addition, South Korea's highly competitive educational system creates heightened anxiety for young people. The suicide rate for South Koreans between the ages of 10 and 19 is the highest in the world. As one author put it, "South Korea's work and school cultures are lethally toxic" (Singh, 2017, p. 1).

ÉMILE DURKHEIM

NOT ALL SUICIDES ARE CREATED EQUAL

Sociologists' interest in linking suicide to certain processes going on in society is not new. In one of the classic pieces of social research, the famous sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858/1951) argued that suicide is more likely to occur under particular social circumstances and in particular communities. He was the first to see suicide as a manifestation of changes in society rather than of psychological shortcomings.

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

For about 7 years, Durkheim carefully examined the available data on suicide rates among various social groups in Europe—from different regions of countries, certain religious or ethnic groups, and so on—looking for important social patterns. If suicides were purely acts of individual desperation, he reasoned, one would not expect to find any noticeable changes in the rates from year to year or from society to society. That is, the distribution of desperate, unstable, unhappy individuals should

be roughly equal across time and culture. If, however, certain groups or societies had a consistently higher rate of suicide than others, something more than individual disposition would seem to be at work.

After compiling his figures, Durkheim concluded that there are actually several different types of suicide. Sometimes, he found, people take their own lives when they see no possible way to improve their oppressive circumstances. They come to the conclusion that suicide is preferable to a harsh life that has no chance of improving. Think of prisoners serving life sentences or slaves who take their own lives to escape their miserable confinement and lack of freedom. Durkheim called this type of suicide **fatalistic suicide**.

Another type, what he called **anomic suicide**, occurs when people's lives are suddenly disrupted by major social events, such as economic depressions, wars, and famines. At these times, he argued, the conditions around which people have organized their lives are dramatically altered, leaving them with a sense of hopelessness and despair as they come to realize they can no longer live the life to which they were accustomed. For instance, anxiety about job insecurity acts as a chronic stressor that can increase the likelihood of suicide (Ng, Agius, & Zaman, 2013). A study of suicide trends over the past 80 years found that overall rates tend to rise during economic recessions and fall during economic expansions

(Luo, Florence, Quispe-Agnoli, Ouyang, & Crosby, 2011). Many experts attribute the 28% increase in suicides among U.S. adults between 35 and 64 in the early 2010s to the economic recession of 2008 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Similarly, the financial crisis that gripped Europe recently led to a spike in suicide rates in the hardest-hit countries such as Greece, Ireland, and Italy. The problem became so pronounced that European psychiatrists started calling it “suicide by economic crisis” (Reeves, McKee, & Stuckler, 2014).

Conversely, Durkheim argued that people who live in poor countries are, in a sense, “immune” to this type of suicide: “Poverty protects against anomic suicide because it is a restraint in itself” (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 254). Indeed, there is some evidence that people who live in poor countries have a significantly lower risk of depression than those who live in industrialized countries (cited in A. Weil, 2011). What Durkheim couldn’t have predicted, however, was the role that communication technology plays in instantly exposing people to the lifestyles of others half a world away. In Durkheim’s time, poor people in isolated rural areas had little, if any, knowledge of how wealthier people lived. So they had no way of comparing their lot in life to others who were better off. Today the Internet is available in some of the remotest regions of the world, providing people with instant information about (and instant comparisons to) the comforts and privileges of the more affluent. So do you think that poverty protects people from committing suicide?

Durkheim 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 de-emphasized, 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.

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 sparsely populated states like Alaska, New Mexico, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019e). Exhibits 1.2a and 1.2b show this pattern. These states tend to have a larger proportion of new residents who are not part of an established community. People tend to be more isolated, less likely to seek help or comfort from others in times of trouble, and therefore more susceptible to suicide than people who live in more populous states. It’s worth noting that sparsely populated rural areas also have higher rates of gun ownership than other areas of the United States. More than half of the rural youths who kill themselves do so with a firearm. Indeed, gun suicides in general are three times more common in rural areas than in urban areas (Beck, 2015b).

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. In some cases, commitment to a particular political cause can be powerful enough to lead some people to take their own lives. In India, the number of politically motivated suicides doubled between 2006 and 2008. For example, a few years ago 200 people took their own lives in support of efforts to establish a separate state, Telangana, in southern India (Polgreen, 2010). Spiritual loyalty can also lead to altruistic suicide. Some religious sects require their members to reject their ties to outside people and groups and to live by the values and customs of their new community. When members feel that they can no longer contribute to the group and sustain their value within it, they may take their own lives out of loyalty to cultural expectations.

Just as suicides in these settings is tied to the social system of which people are a part, so, too, was the suicide of the young college student at my university. His choices and life circumstances were also a function of the values and conditions of his particular society. No

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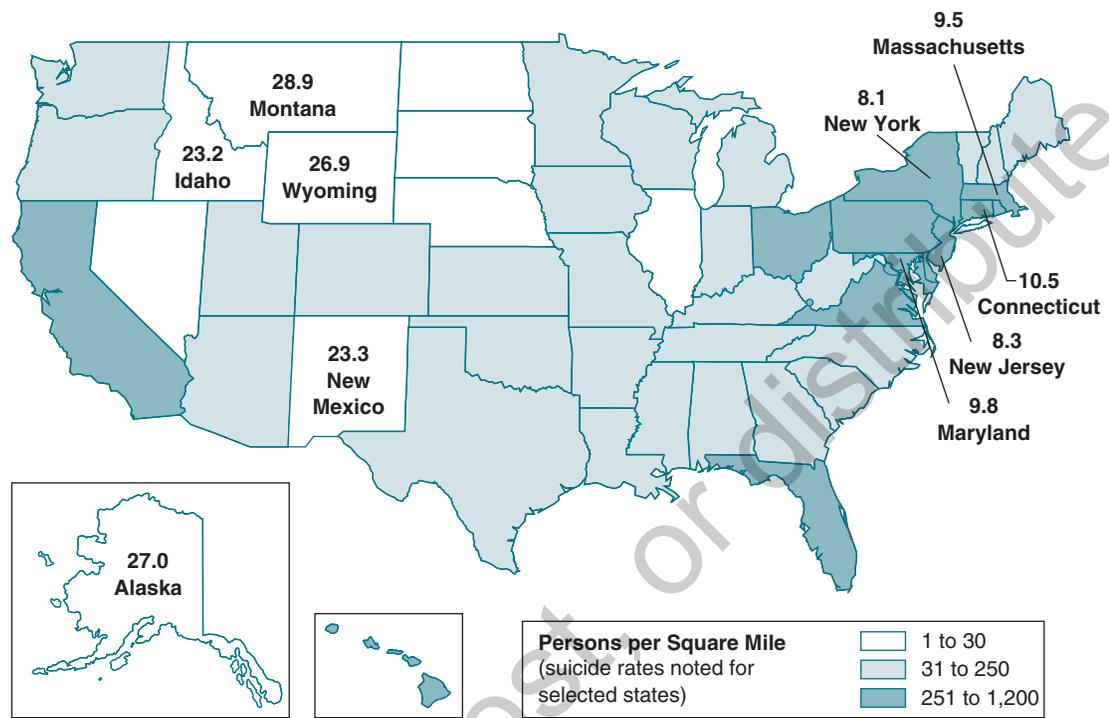
doubt he had serious emotional problems, but these problems may have been part and parcel of his social circumstances. Had he lived in a society that didn't place

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.

EXHIBIT 1.2A ■ The More Crowded the State, the Lower the Suicide Rate

State	Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population	Persons per Square Mile	State	Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population	Persons per Square Mile
United States	14.0	92.6	Missouri	18.5	89.1
Alabama	16.6	96.5	Montana	28.9	7.3
Alaska	27.0	1.3	Nebraska	14.7	25.1
Arizona	18.2	63.1	Nevada	20.3	27.6
Arkansas	20.8	57.9	New Hampshire	18.9	151.5
California	10.5	253.9	New Jersey	8.3	1,211.3
Colorado	20.3	55.0	New Mexico	23.3	17.3
Connecticut	10.5	737.8	New York	8.1	414.7
Delaware	11.6	496.4	North Carolina	14.3	213.6
District of Columbia	7.9	11,506.2	North Dakota	20.1	11.0
Florida	14.0	397.2	Ohio	14.8	286.1
Georgia	13.6	182.9	Oklahoma	19.1	57.5
Hawaii	15.2	221.2	Oregon	19.0	43.7
Idaho	23.2	21.2	Pennsylvania	15.0	286.2
Illinois	11.2	229.5	Rhode Island	11.8	1,022.7
Indiana	16.3	186.8	South Carolina	16.3	169.1
Iowa	15.0	56.5	South Dakota	22.5	11.6
Kansas	19.1	35.6	Tennessee	16.8	164.2
Kentucky	16.9	113.2	Texas	13.4	109.9
Louisiana	15.2	107.9	Utah	22.7	38.5
Maine	18.9	43.4	Vermont	18.3	68.0
Maryland	9.8	622.5	Virginia	13.4	215.7
Massachusetts	9.5	884.9	Washington	16.9	113.4
Michigan	14.1	176.8	West Virginia	21.1	75.1
Minnesota	13.8	70.5	Wisconsin	15.4	107.3
Mississippi	15.0	63.6	Wyoming	26.9	6.0

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019d); ProQuest Statistical Abstract (2019, Table 15).

EXHIBIT 1.2B ■ What States Have the Highest and Lowest Suicide Rates?

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019d); ProQuest Statistical Abstract (2019, Table 15).

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

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, school shootings, cultural upheavals) often quickly reverberate around the world. The local and global consequences of such events often continue to be felt for years.

When we look at how people's lives are altered by such phenomena—as they sink into poverty or ascend to prosperity, stand in bread lines or enter a career 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. 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 (P. L. Berger, 1963). At the same time, we constantly create, maintain, reaffirm, and transform society. Hence, society is part and parcel of individual-level human interaction, what sociologists call **microlevel** everyday phenomena (R. Collins, 1981). But although we create society, we then collectively forget we've done so, believe it exists independently of us, and live our lives under its influence. The Micro-Macro Connections found throughout this book will help you see this interrelationship between macrolevel societal forces and many of the microlevel experiences we have as individuals.

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, at least in part, of broader historical circumstances. Yet what does this actually mean? Is it possible to see the impact of larger social and historical events on your own life? One way is to find out what occurrences were happening at the time of your birth. Go to the library—or an online archive—and find a newspaper and a popular magazine that were published on the day you were born. It would be especially useful to find a newspaper from the town or city in which you were born. What major news events took place that day? What were the dominant social and political concerns at the time? What was the state of the economy? What was considered fashionable in clothing, music, movies, and so forth? Ask your parents or other adults about their reactions to these events and conditions.

How do you think those reactions affected the values of your family and the way you were raised? 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 similar media sources to determine the political, economic, global, and cultural trends that were prominent 15 or so years later when you entered high school. The emergence from adolescence into young adulthood is a significant developmental stage in the lives of most people. It often marks the first time that others—including parents and other adults—take us seriously. And it is arguably the most self-conscious time of our lives. Try to determine how these dominant social phenomena will continue to influence your life after college. Imagine how different your life might have been had these social conditions been different—for instance, a different political atmosphere, a stronger or weaker economy, a more tolerant or more restrictive way of life, and so on.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- The primary theme of sociology is that our everyday thoughts and actions are the product of a complex interplay between massive social forces and personal characteristics. We can't understand the relationship between individuals and societies without understanding both.
- The sociological imagination is the ability to see the impact of social forces on our private lives—an awareness that our lives lie at the intersection of personal biography and societal history.

- Rather than studying what goes on within people, sociologists study what goes on between people, whether as individuals, groups, organizations, or

entire societies. Sociology forces us to look outside the tight confines of our individual personalities to understand the phenomena that shape us.

KEY TERMS

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

anomic suicide: Type of suicide that occurs when the structure of society is weakened or disrupted and people feel hopeless and disillusioned

comparative method: Research technique that compares existing official statistics and historical records across groups to test a theory about some social phenomenon

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

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

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

macrolevel: Way of examining human life that focuses on the broad social forces and structural features of society that exist above the level of individual people

microlevel: Way of examining human life that focuses on the immediate, everyday experiences of individuals

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

sociology: The systematic study of human societies

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