1 Sociology
A Unique Way to View the World

Sociology involves a transformation in the way one sees the world—learning to recognize the complex connections among our intimate personal lives, large organizations, and national and global systems.
This model illustrates a core idea carried throughout the book—how your own life is shaped by your family, community, society, and world and how you influence them in return. Understanding this model can help you to better understand your social world and to make a positive impact on it.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER

This chapter will help you do the following:

1.1 Explain the sociological perspective.

1.2 Describe why sociology can be useful for us.

1.3 Show how the social world model works, with examples.
The womb is apparently the setting for some great body work. It may win the prize for the strangest place to get a back massage, but, according to a recent scientific article, by the fourth month of gestation, twin fetuses begin reaching for their “womb-mates,” and by 18 weeks, they spend more time touching their siblings than themselves or the walls of the uterus (Weaver 2010). Fetuses that have single-womb occupancy tend to touch the walls of the uterus a good deal to make contact with the mother. Nearly 30% of the movements of twins is directed toward their companions. Movements such as stroking the back or the head are more sustained and more precise than movements toward themselves—touching their own mouths or other facial features. As one team of scholars put it, we are “wired to be social” (Castiello et al. 2010). In short, humans are innately social creatures.

The social world is not merely something that exists outside us. As the story of the twins illustrates, the social world is also something we carry inside. We are part of it, we reflect on it, and we are influenced by it, even when we are alone. The patterns of the social world engulf us in ways both subtle and obvious, with profound implications for how we create order and meaning in our lives. We need others—and that is where sociology enters.

Sometimes, it takes a dramatic and shocking event for us to realize just how deeply embedded we are in our relationships in the social world that we take for granted. “It couldn’t happen in the United States,” read typical world newspaper accounts. “This is something you see in the Middle East, Central Africa, and other war-torn areas. . . . It’s hard to imagine this happening in the economic center of the United States.” Yet on September 11, 2001, shortly after 9 a.m., a commercial airliner crashed into New York City’s World Trade Center, followed a short while later by another pummeling into the paired tower. This mighty symbol of financial wealth collapsed. After the dust settled and the rescue crews finished their gruesome work, nearly 3,000 people were dead and many others injured. The world as we knew it changed forever that day. This event taught U.S. citizens how integrally connected they are with the international community.

Such terrorist acts horrify people because they are unpredictable and unexpected in a normally predictable world. They violate the rules that support our connections to one another. They also bring attention to the discontent and disconnectedness that lie under the surface in many societies—discontent that can come to the surface and express itself in hateful violence. Such discontent and hostility are likely to continue until the root causes are addressed.

Terrorist acts represent a rejection of the modern civil society we know. The terrorists themselves see their acts as justifiable, as a way they can strike out against injustices and threats to their way of life. Few outside the terrorists’ inner circle understand their thinking and behavior. The events of 9/11 forced U.S. citizens to realize that although they may see a great diversity among themselves, people in other parts of the world view U.S. citizens as all the same;
they are despised by some for what they represent: consumerism, individualism, freedom of religion, and tolerance of other perspectives. The United States is a world power, yet its values challenge and threaten the views of many people around the world. For many U.S. citizens, a sense of loyalty to the nation was deeply stirred by the events of 9/11. Patriotism abounded. The nation’s people became more connected to one another and to their identity as U.S. citizens as a reaction to an act against the United States.

A similar sense of patriotism and connectedness arose immediately after the bombing at the Boston Marathon in 2013. First responders and marathon runners pierced with shrapnel were held up as heroes and symbols of U.S. pride and perseverance in the face of terrorist attacks. As Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, first pointed out, acts that break normal rules of behavior, as terrorism does, can unite the rule-following members of society (Durkheim [1895] 1982).

Most of the time, we live with social patterns that we take for granted as routine, ordinary, and expected. These social patterns help us to understand what is happening and to know what to expect. Unlike our innate drives, social expectations come from those around us and guide (or constrain) our behaviors and thoughts. Without shared expectations among humans about proper patterns of behavior, life would be chaotic. Our social interactions require some basic rules, and these rules create routine and normalcy in everyday interaction. It would be strange if someone broke the expected patterns. For the people in and around the World Trade Center on 9/11 and Boston on April 15, 2013, the social rules governing everyday life were brutally violated.

This chapter examines the social ties that make up our social world, as well as sociology’s focus on those connections. You will learn what sociology is, what sociologists do, how sociology can be used to improve your life and society, and how the social world model helps us understand how society works.

**WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?**

Sociology is the scientific study of social life, social change, and social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists examine how society both shapes and is shaped by individuals, small groups of people, organizations, national societies, and global social networks.

The terrorist bombing of the 2013 Boston Marathon inspired residents in the Boston area and marathon runners to stand strong in the face of terrorism. The 2014 Boston Marathon attracted even more participants and spectators.
For you, this means learning how what you do affects other people and groups—and how they affect your life.

Unlike the discipline of psychology, which focuses on the attributes, motivations, and behaviors of individuals, sociology focuses on group patterns. Whereas a psychologist might try to explain behavior by examining the personality traits of individuals, a sociologist would examine the positions or tasks of different people within the group and how these positions influence what individuals think and do. Sociologists seek to analyze and explain why people interact with others and belong to groups, how groups like the family or you and your friends work together, why some groups have more power than other groups, how decisions are made, and how groups deal with conflict and change. Sociologists also examine the causes of social problems, such as child abuse, crime, poverty, and war, and ways they can be addressed.

Two-person interactions—dyads—are the smallest units studied by sociologists. Examples of dyads include roommates discussing their classes, a professor and student going over an assignment, a husband and wife negotiating their budget, and two children playing. Next in size are small groups consisting of three or more interacting people who know each other—a family, a neighborhood or peer group, a classroom, a work group, or a street gang. Then come increasingly larger groups—organizations such as sports or scouting clubs, neighborhood associations, and local religious congregations. Among the largest groups contained within nations are ethnic groups and national organizations or institutions, such as the auto industry, the Republican and Democratic national political parties, and national religious organizations, like the Southern Baptists. Nations themselves are still larger and can sometimes involve hundreds of millions of people. In the past several decades, social scientists have also pointed to globalization, the process by which the entire world is becoming a single interdependent entity. Of particular interest to sociologists is how these various groups are organized, how they function, why they can come into conflict, and how they influence one another.

Thinking Sociologically
Identify several dyads, small groups, and large organizations to which you belong. Did you choose to belong, or were you born into membership in these groups? How does each group influence who you are and the decisions you make? How do you influence each of the groups?

Ideas Underlying Sociology
The idea that one action can cause another is a core idea in all science. Sociologists also share several ideas that they take for granted about the social world. These ideas about humans and social life are supported by considerable evidence, and they are no longer matters of debate or controversy. They are considered to be true. Understanding these core assumptions helps us see how sociologists approach the study of people in groups.

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

People live much of their lives belonging to social groups. It is in social groups that we interact with family, friends, and work groups; learn to share goals and to cooperate with others in our groups; develop identities that are influenced by our group affiliations; obtain power over others—or are relatively powerless; and have conflicts with others over resources we all want. Our individual beliefs and behaviors, our experiences, our observations, and the problems we face are derived from connections to our social groups.
Interaction between the individual and the group is a two-way process in which each influences the other. In our family or on a sports team, we can influence the shape and direction of our group, just as the group provides the rules and decides the expected behaviors for individuals.

Recurrent social patterns, ordered behavior, shared expectations, and common understandings among people characterize groups. Consider the earlier examples of the chaos created by 9/11 and the Boston Marathon bombing. These events were so troubling because they were unexpected and out of the normal range of expectations. Normally, a degree of continuity and recurrent behavior is present in human interactions, whether in small groups, large organizations, or society.

The processes of conflict and change are natural and inevitable features of groups and societies. No group can remain unchanged and hope to perpetuate itself. To survive, groups must adapt to changes in the social and physical environment, yet rapid change often comes at a price. It can lead to conflict within a society—between traditional and new ideas and between groups that have vested interests in particular ways of doing things. Rapid change can give rise to protest activities; changing in a controversial direction or failing to change fast enough can spark conflict, including revolution. The Arab Spring demonstrations illustrate the desire for rapid change from long-standing dictatorships, springing from citizens’ discontent with corrupt or authoritarian rule. The problem is finding acceptable replacement governments to take over what has been overthrown.

The previous ideas underlying sociology will be relevant in each of the topics we discuss. As you read this book, keep in mind these basic ideas that form the foundation of sociological analysis: People are social; they live and carry out activities largely in groups; interaction influences both individual and group behavior; people share common behavior patterns and expectations; and processes such as change and conflict are always present. Thus, in several important ways, sociological understandings provide new lenses for looking at our social world.

Sociological Findings and Commonsense Beliefs

Through research, sociologists have shown that many commonly held beliefs are not actually true, and some “commonsense” ideas have been discredited by sociological research. Here are three examples.

Belief: Most of the differences in the behaviors of women and men are based on “human nature”; men and women are plainly very different from each other. Research shows that biological factors certainly play a part in the behaviors of men and women, but the culture (beliefs, values, rules, and way of life) that people learn as they grow up determines who does what and how biological tendencies are played out. A unique example illustrates this: In the nomadic Wodaabe tribe in Africa, women do most of the heavy work, whereas men adorn themselves with makeup, sip tea, and gossip (Cultural Survival 2010; Loftsdottir 2004). Each year, the group holds a festival where men adorn makeup and fancy hairstyles and show their white teeth and the whites of their eyes to attract a marriage partner. Such dramatic variations in the behavior of men and women around the world are so great that it is impossible to attribute behavior solely to biology or human nature alone; learned behavior patterns enter in.

Belief: Racial groupings are based on biological differences among people. Actually, racial categorizations are socially constructed (created by members of society) and vary among societies and over time within societies. A person can be seen as one race in Brazil and another in the United States. Even within the United States, racial categories have changed many times. All one has to do is look at old
U.S. Census records and see how racial categories change over time—even within the same nation!

**Belief: Most marriages in the United States do not last.** The well-known divorce rate figure of 50% is misleading. To get an accurate rate, sociologist Paul Amato looked at four ways of calculating the rate: The crude divorce rate, or the percentage ever divorced, is currently 22% for women and 21% for men. The refined divorce rate, or the annual number of divorces per 1,000 married women, now stands at 1.9%. The cohort measure rate gives us the high number of 40% to 50%, but it only represents a particular time and group of people (Amato 2011). Those who marry at age 18 or before, have less education than the average person, low levels of income, and have the highest divorce rates (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014). Those who are middle class or higher tend to have more stable marriages (Pew Research Center 2010; Stanton 2015).

As these examples illustrate, the discipline of sociology provides a method to assess the accuracy of our common-sense assumptions about the social world. To improve the lives of individuals in our communities and in societies around the world, decision makers must have accurate information. Sociological research can be the basis for more rational and just social policies—policies that better meet the needs of all groups in the social world. The sociological imagination, discussed next, helps us gain an understanding of social problems.

**The Sociological Imagination**

Events in our social world affect our individual lives. If we are unemployed or lack funds for a college education, we may say this is a personal problem. Yet broader social issues are often at the root of our situation. The sociological imagination holds that we can best understand our personal experiences and problems by examining their broader social context—by looking at the big picture.

Many individual problems (or private troubles) are rooted in social or public issues (what is happening in the social world outside one’s personal control). Distinguished sociologist C. Wright Mills called the ability to understand this complex interactive relationship between individual experiences and public issues the sociological imagination. For Mills, many personal experiences can and should be interpreted in the context of large-scale forces in the wider society (C. Mills 1959).

Consider, for example, someone you know who has been laid off from a job. This personal trauma is a common situation during a recession. Unemployed persons often experience feelings of inadequacy or lack of self-worth because of the job loss. Their unemployment, though, may be due to larger forces, such as mechanization, unsound banking practices, corporate downsizing, or a corporation taking operations to another country, where labor costs are cheaper and where there are fewer environmental regulations on companies. People may blame themselves or each other for personal troubles, such as unemployment or marital problems, believing that they did not try hard enough. Often, they do not see the connection between their private lives and larger economic and social forces beyond their control. They fail to recognize the public issues that create private troubles.

If you are having trouble paying for college, that may feel like a very personal trouble. High tuition rates, though, relate to a dramatic decline in governmental support for public higher education and financial aid for students. The rising cost of a college education is a serious public issue that our society needs to address. Individuals, alone, cannot reduce the high price of college.

As you learn about sociology, you will begin to notice how social forces shape individual lives and how this knowledge helps us understand aspects of everyday life we take for granted. In this book, we investigate how group life influences our behaviors and interactions and why some individuals follow the rules of society, and others do not. You will learn to view the social world and your place in it from a sociological perspective as you develop your sociological imagination. Connecting events from the global and national levels to the personal and intimate level of our own lives is the core organizing theme of this book.

**Thinking Sociologically**

How has divorce, poverty, or war caused personal troubles for someone you know? Give examples of why it is inadequate to explain these personal troubles by examining only the personal characteristics of those affected.

**Questions Sociologists Ask—and Don’t Ask**

Perhaps you have had late-night discussions with your friends about the meaning of life, the existence of God, the ethical implications of genetically modified food, or the morality of abortion. These are philosophical issues that sociologists, like other scientists, cannot answer through scientific research. What sociologists do ask are questions
about people in social groups and organizations—questions that can be studied scientifically. Sociologists may research how people feel about such issues (the percentage of people who want genetically modified food to be labeled, for example), but sociologists do not say what are right and wrong answers to such value-driven opinions. They are more interested in how people's beliefs influence their behavior. They focus on issues that can be studied objectively and scientifically—looking for causes or consequences.

Sociologists might ask, *Who gets an abortion, why do they do so, and how does the society, as a whole, view abortion?* These are matters of fact that a social scientist can explore. However, sociologists avoid making ethical judgments about whether abortion is sometimes acceptable or always wrong. In their private lives, sociologists and other scientists may have opinions on controversial philosophical issues, but these should not enter into their scientific work.

Likewise, sociologists might ask, *What are the circumstances around individuals becoming drunk and acting drunken?* This question is often tied more to the particular social environment than to the availability of alcohol. Note that a person might become very intoxicated at a fraternity party but not at a family member’s wedding reception where alcohol is served. The expectations for behavior vary in each setting. The researcher does not make judgments about whether use of alcohol is good or bad or right or wrong and avoids—as much as possible—opinions regarding responsibility or irresponsibility. The sociologist does, however, observe variations in the use of alcohol in different social situations and the resulting behaviors. The focus of sociology is on facts and what causes behaviors and their results.

**Thinking Sociologically**

Consider the information you have just read. What are some questions sociologists might ask about drinking and drunkenness? What are some questions sociologists would not ask about these topics, at least while in their role as researchers?

**The Social Sciences: A Comparison**

Not so long ago, our views of people and social relationships were based on stereotypes, intuition, superstitions, supernatural explanations, and traditions passed on from one generation to the next. Natural scientists (e.g., chemists, astronomers, biologists, and oceanographers) first used the scientific method, a model later adopted by social scientists. Social scientists, including anthropologists, psychologists, economists, cultural geographers, historians, and political scientists, as well as sociologists, apply the scientific method to study social relationships, to correct misleading and harmful misconceptions about human behavior, and to guide policy decisions. Consider the following examples of specific social science studies.

Some anthropological studies focus on garbage. They examine what people discard to understand what kind of lives they lead (Bond 2010). *Anthropology* is the study of humanity in its broadest context. It is closely related to sociology, and the two areas have common historical roots and sometimes overlapping methodologies and subject matter. However, anthropologists have four major subfields within anthropology: physical anthropology (which is related to biology), archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology (sometimes called *ethnology*). This last field has the most in common with sociology. Cultural anthropologists study the culture, or way of life, of a society.

Binge drinking, losing consciousness, vomiting, or engaging in sexual acts while drunk may be sources of storytelling at a college party but can be offensive at a wedding reception.
A psychologist may wire research subjects to a machine that measures their physiological reaction to a violent film clip and then ask them questions about what they were feeling. Psychology is the study of individual behavior and mental processes (e.g., sensation, perception, memory, and thought processes). It differs from sociology in that it focuses on individuals rather than on groups, institutions, and societies. Although there are different branches of psychology, most psychologists are concerned with individual motivations, personality attributes, attitudes, perceptions, abnormal behavior, mental disorders, and the stages of normal human development.

A political scientist studies opinion poll results to predict who will win the next election, how various groups of people are likely to vote, or how elected officials will vote on proposed legislation. Political science is concerned with government systems and power—how they work, how they are organized, the forms of government, relations among governments, who holds power and how they obtain it, how power is used, and who is politically active. Political science overlaps with sociology, particularly in the study of political theory and the nature and uses of power.

Many economists study the banking system and market trends to try to predict trends and understand the global economy. Economists analyze economic conditions and explore how people organize, produce, and distribute material goods. They are interested in supply and demand, inflation and taxes, prices and manufacturing output, labor organization, employment levels, and comparisons between postindustrial, industrial, and nonindustrial nations.

What these social sciences—sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, and economics—have in common is that they study aspects of human behavior and social life. Social sciences share many common topics, methods, concepts, research findings, and theories, but each has a different focus or perspective on the social world. Each of these social sciences relates to topics studied by sociologists, but sociologists focus on human interaction, groups, and social structure, providing the broadest overview of the social world.

**Thinking Sociologically**

Consider the issue of unemployment in the United States. What is one question in each discipline that an anthropologist, psychologist, political scientist, economist, and sociologist might ask about this social issue?

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**WHY DOES SOCIOLOGY MATTER?**

Sociology is important because it helps us understand our relationships with other people and inform social policy decisions. We can also pursue a career in sociology or use skills developed through sociology in a wide range of career fields.

**Why Study Sociology?**

The sociological perspective helps us to be more effective as we carry out our roles as life partners, workers, friends, family members, and citizens. For example, an employee who has studied sociology may better understand how to work with groups and how the structure of the workplace affects individual behavior, how to approach problem solving, and how to collect and analyze data. Likewise, a schoolteacher trained in sociology may have a better understanding of classroom management, student motivation, the causes of poor student learning that have roots outside the school, and why students drop out.

A sociological perspective allows us to look beneath the surface of society and notice social patterns that others tend to overlook. When you view our social world with a sociological perspective, you

1. become more self-aware by understanding your social surroundings, which can lead to opportunities to improve your life;
2. have a more complete understanding of social situations by looking beyond individual explanations to include group analyses of behavior;
3. understand and evaluate problems more clearly, viewing the world systematically and objectively rather than only in emotional or personal terms;
4. gain an understanding of the many diverse cultural perspectives and how cultural differences are related to behavioral patterns;
5. assess the impact of social policies;
6. understand the complexities of social life and how to study them scientifically;
7. gain useful skills in interpersonal relations, critical thinking, data collection and analysis, problem solving, and decision making; and
8. learn how to change your local environment and the larger society.

What Do Sociologists Do?
Graduates with a bachelor’s degree in sociology who seek employment immediately after college are most likely to find their first jobs in social services, administrative assistantships, sales and marketing, or management-related positions. The kinds of employment of college graduates with a sociology major are listed in Figure 1.1. With graduate degrees—a master’s or a doctoral degree—sociologists usually become college teachers, researchers, clinicians, or consultants. Some work for governments while others work for businesses or public-service nonprofit organizations.

Many sociologists work outside of academia, using their knowledge and research skills to address the needs of businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government. For example, they often work in human resources departments and as consultants for businesses. In government jobs, they provide data, such as population projections for education and health care planning. In social service agencies, they help provide services to those in need, and in health agencies, they may be concerned with outreach to immigrant communities. Both sociologists who work in universities and those who work for business or government can use sociological tools to improve society. You will find examples of sociologists in the “Sociologists in Action” boxes throughout the book. In addition, at the end of some chapters, you will find a discussion of policy related to that chapter topic.

Thinking Sociologically
From what you have read so far, how might sociological tools (e.g., social interaction skills and knowledge of how groups work) be useful to you in your anticipated major and career or current job?

What Do Employers Want?
Ask employers what they want in a new hire, and the focus is likely to be on writing, speaking, and analytical skills—especially when the new employee will be faced with complex problems. Other desired skills in demand include the ability to cope with change, work effectively in diverse teams, and gather and interpret quantitative information (Miller 2015). Indeed, Deming reports that having a combination of social skills and math skills is the best predictor of landing a job that is unlikely to be replaced by technological automation and tends to do better than most other areas in pay (Deming 2015). The left column in Table 1.1 indicates what employers want from college graduates; the right column indicates the skills and competencies that are part of most sociological training. Compare the two, noting the high levels of overlap.

We now have a general idea of what sociology is and what sociologists do. It should be apparent that sociology is a broad field of interest; sociologists study all aspects of human social behavior. The next section of this chapter shows how the parts of the social world that sociologists study relate to each other, and it outlines the model you will follow as you continue to learn about sociology.

FIGURE 1.1 Occupational Categories for Sociology Graduates’ First Jobs

Source: Senter, Spalter-Roth, and Van Vooren (2012). For further information, see www.asanet.org/documents/research/pdfs/Early_Employment.pdf
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employers Who Want Colleges to “Place More Emphasis” on Essential Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Traits and Knowledge That Are Developed in Most Sociological Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge of Human Culture</strong></td>
<td>% Seeking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1. Global issues | 72 | • Knowledge of global issues  
• Sensitivity to diversity and differences in cultural values and traditions |
| 2. The role of the United States in the world | 60 | • Sociological perspective on the United States and the world |
| 3. Cultural values and traditions—U.S. and global | 53 | • Understanding diversity  
• Working with others (ability to work toward a common goal) |
| **Intellectual and Practical Skills** | % Seeking |
| 4. Teamwork skills in diverse groups | 76 | • Effective leadership skills (ability to take charge and make decisions)  
• Interpersonal skills (working with diverse coworkers) |
| 5. Critical thinking and analytic reasoning | 73 | • Analysis and research skills  
• Organizing thoughts and information  
• Planning effectively (ability to design, plan, organize, and implement projects and to be self-motivated) |
| 6. Written and oral communication | 73 | • Communication skills (listening, verbal and written communication)  
• Working with peers  
• Effective interaction in group situations |
| 7. Information literacy | 70 | • Knowledge of how to find information one needs—online or in a library |
| 8. Creativity and innovation | 70 | • Flexibility, adaptability, and multitasking (ability to set priorities, manage multiple tasks, adapt to changing situations, and handle pressure)  
• Creative ways to deal with problems |
| 9. Complex problem solving | 64 | • Ability to conceptualize and solve problems  
• Ability to be creative (working toward meeting the organization’s goals) |
| 10. Quantitative reasoning | 60 | • Computer and technical literacy (basic understanding of computer hardware and software programs)  
• Statistical analysis |
| **Personal and Social Responsibility** | % Seeking |
| 11. Intercultural competence (teamwork in diverse groups) | 76 | • Personal values (honesty, flexibility, work ethic, dependability, loyalty, positive attitude, professionalism, self-confidence, willingness to learn)  
• Working with others; ability to work toward a common goal |
| 12. Intercultural knowledge (global issues) | 72 | • Knowledge of global issues |

Thinking Sociologically

Imagine that you are a mayor, legislator, police chief, or another government official. You make decisions based on information gathered by social science research rather than on your own intuition or assumptions. What are some advantages to this decision-making method?

THE SOCIAL WORLD MODEL

Think about the different groups you depend on and interact with on a daily basis. You wake up to greet members of your family or your roommate. You go to a larger group—a class—that exists within an even larger organization—the college or university. Understanding sociology and the approach of this book requires a grasp of levels of analysis—that is, social groups from the smallest to the largest. It may be relatively easy to picture small groups, such as a family, a group of friends, a sports team, or a sorority or fraternity. It is more difficult to visualize large groups, such as corporations—The Gap, Abercrombie & Fitch, Eddie Bauer, General Motors Company, or Starbucks—or organizations such as local or state governments. The largest groups include nations or international organizations, such as the sprawling networks of the United Nations or the World Trade Organization. Groups of various sizes shape our lives. Sociological analysis involves an understanding of these groups that exist at various levels of analysis and the connections among them.

The social world model helps us picture the levels of analysis in our social surroundings as an interconnected series of small groups, organizations, institutions, and societies. Sometimes, these groups are connected by mutual support and cooperation, but other times, there are conflicts and power struggles over access to resources. What we are asking you to do here and throughout this book is to develop a sociological imagination—the basic lens used by sociologists. Picture the social world as connected levels of increasingly larger circles. To understand the units or parts of the social world model, look at the model shown here (and at the beginning of each chapter).

We use this social world model throughout the book to illustrate how each topic fits into the big picture: our social world. The social world includes both social structures and social processes.

Social Structures

Picture the human body, held together by bones and muscles. The organs, or units, that make up that body include the brain, heart, lungs, and kidneys. In a similar manner, social units are interconnected parts of the social world, ranging from small groups to societies. These social units include dyads (two people); small groups, like the members of a family; community organizations, including schools and churches; large-scale organizations, such as political parties or state and national governments; and global societies, such as the United Nations.

All social institutions are interrelated, just as the parts of the body are interdependent: If the skeletal system of the body breaks down, the muscular system and nervous system are not going to be able to get the body to do what it needs to do.
Part I: Understanding Our Social World

Religious organizations and religious business owners have fought against the requirements of the 2010 Affordable Care Act in the United States that employers provide birth control to those who wish to receive it.

Social institutions are organized, patterned, and enduring sets of social structures that provide guidelines for behavior and help each society meet its basic survival needs. Think about the fact that all societies have some form of family, education, religion, politics, and economics; in more complex societies, there are also essential structures that provide science, media, health care, and a military. These are the institutions that provide the rules, roles, and relationships to meet human needs and guide human behavior. They are the units through which organized social activities take place, and they provide the setting for activities essential to human and societal survival. For example, we cannot survive without an economic institution to provide guidelines and a structure for meeting our basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Likewise, society would not function without political institutions to govern and protect its members. Most social units fall under one of these institutions.

Like the human body, society and social groups have a structure. Our body’s skeleton governs how our limbs are attached to the torso and how they move. Like the system of organs that make up our bodies—heart, lungs, kidneys, and bladder—all social institutions are interrelated. Just as an illness in one organ affects other organs, a dysfunction in one institution affects the other institutions. A heart attack affects the flow of blood to all other parts of the body. Likewise, if many people are unable to afford medical treatment, the society is less healthy, and there are consequences for families, schools, workplaces, and society as a whole.

The national society, one of the largest social units in our model, includes a population of people, usually living within a specified geographic area, connected by common ideas and subject to a particular political authority. It also features a social structure with groups and institutions. In addition to having relatively permanent geographic and political boundaries, a national society has one or more languages and a unique way of life. In most cases, national societies involve countries or large regions where the inhabitants share a common identity as members. In certain other instances, such as the contemporary United Kingdom, a single national society may include several groups of people who consider themselves distinct nationalities (Welsh, English, Scottish, and Irish). Such multicultural societies may or may not have peaceful relations.

Thinking Sociologically
How might change in one national institution, such as health care, affect change in other national institutions, such as the family and the economy? Can you think of any human activities that do not fall into one of the institutions just mentioned?

Social Processes
If social structure is similar to the human body’s skeletal structure, social processes are similar to what keeps the body alive—a beating heart, the lungs processing oxygen, and the stomach processing nutrients. Social processes take place through actions of people in institutions and other social units. The process of socialization teaches individuals how to behave in society. It takes place through actions in families, educational systems, religious organizations, and other social units.
Socialization is essential for the continuation of any society because, through this process, members of society learn the thoughts and actions needed to survive in their society. Another process, conflict, occurs between individuals or groups over money, jobs, and other needed or desired resources. The process of change also occurs continuously in every social unit; change in one unit affects other units of the social world, often in a chain reaction. For instance, change in the quality of health care can affect the workforce; a workforce in poor health can affect the economy; instability in the economy can affect families, as breadwinners lose jobs; and family economic woes can affect religious communities because devastated families cannot afford to give money to churches, mosques, or temples.

Sociologists try to identify, understand, and explain the processes that take place within social units. Picture these processes as overlying and penetrating our whole social world, from small groups to societies. Social units would be lifeless without the action brought about by social processes, just as body parts would be lifeless without the processes of electrical impulses shooting from the brain to each organ or the oxygen transmitted by blood coursing through our arteries to sustain each organ.

The Environment of Our Social World

Surrounding each social unit, whether a small family group or a large corporation, is an environment—the setting in which the social unit operates, including everything that influences the social unit, such as its physical and organizational surroundings and technological innovations. Just as each individual has a unique environment, including family, friends, and other social units, each social unit has an environment to which it must adjust. For example, your local church, synagogue, temple, or mosque is surrounded by its unique environment. That religious organization may seem autonomous and independent, but it depends on its national organization for guidelines and support; the local police force to protect the building from vandalism; and the local economy to provide jobs to members so that the members, in turn, can support the organization. If the religious education program is going to train children to understand the scriptures, local schools are needed to teach the children to read. A religious group may also be affected by other religious bodies, competing with one another for potential members from the community. These religious groups may work cooperatively—organizing a summer program for children or jointly sponsoring a holy day celebration—or they may define one another as evil, each trying to malign or stigmatize the other. Moreover, one local religious group may be composed primarily of professional and businesspeople and another group mostly of laboring people. The religious groups may experience conflict, in part, because they each serve a different socioeconomic constituency. The point is that to understand a social unit or the human body, we must consider the structure and processes within the unit, as well as the interaction with the surrounding environment.

Perfect relationships or complete harmony among the social units is unusual. Social units, be they small groups or large organizations, are often motivated by self-interest and the need for self-preservation, with the result that they compete with other units for resources (time, money, skills, and the energy of members). Therefore, social units within a society are often in conflict. Whether groups are in conflict or they cooperate does not change their interrelatedness; units are interdependent and can be studied using the scientific method.

Studying the Social World: Levels of Analysis

Picture for a moment your sociology class as a social unit in your social world. Students (individuals) make up the class, the class (small group) is offered by the sociology department, the sociology department (a large group, including faculty and students) is part of the college or university, and the university (an organization) is located in a community. It follows the practices approved by the social institution (education) of which it is a part, and education is an institution located within a nation. Practices the university follows are determined by a larger accrediting agency that provides guidelines and oversight for educational institutions. The national society, represented by the national government, is shaped by global events, such as technological and economic competition among nations, natural disasters, global climate change, wars, and terrorist attacks. Such events influence national policies and goals, including policies for the educational system. Thus, global issues and conflicts may shape the content of the curriculum taught in the local classroom, from what is studied to the textbooks used.

As discussed, each of these social units is referred to as a level of analysis (from two students in a discussion group to a society or global system; see Table 1.2). These levels are illustrated in the social world model at the beginning of each chapter, and their relation to that chapter’s content is shown through examples in the model.
Micro-Level Analysis. A focus on individual or small-group interaction in specific situations is called micro-level analysis. The micro level is important because one-to-one and small-group interaction form the basic foundation of all social groups and organizations to which we belong, from families to corporations to societies. We are members of many groups at the micro level.

To understand micro-level analysis, consider the problem of spousal abuse, most often involving women being abused. Why does a person remain in an abusive relationship, knowing that each year thousands of people are killed by their partners and millions more are severely and repeatedly battered? To answer this question, several possible micro-level explanations can be considered. One view is that the abusive partner has convinced the abused person that she is powerless in the relationship or that she “deserves” the abuse. Therefore, she gives up in despair of ever being able to alter the situation. The abuse is viewed as part of the interaction—of action and reaction—and some partners come to see abuse as what composes normal interaction.

Another explanation for remaining in the abusive relationship is that battering is a familiar part of the person’s everyday life. However unpleasant and unnatural this may seem to outsiders, it may be seen by the abused as a normal and acceptable part of intimate relationships, especially if she grew up in an abusive family.

Another possibility is that an abused woman may fear that her children would be harmed or that she would be harshly judged by her family or religious group if she “abandoned” her mate. She may have few resources to make leaving the abusive situation possible. To study each of these possible explanations involves analysis at the micro level because each focuses on interpersonal interaction factors rather than on large, society-wide trends or forces. Meso-level analysis leads to quite different explanations for abuse.

Meso-Level Analysis. Meso-level analysis involves looking at intermediate-sized units smaller than the nation but larger than the local community or even the region. This level includes national institutions (such as the economy of a country, the national educational system, or the political system within a country), nationwide organizations (such as a political party, a soccer league, or a national women’s rights organization), and ethnic groups that have an identity as a group (such as Jews, Mexican Americans, or Native Americans in the United States). Organizations, institutions, and ethnic communities are smaller than the nation or global social units, but they are still beyond the everyday personal experience and control of individuals. They are intermediate in the sense of being too large to know everyone in the group, but they are not as large as nation-states. For example, state governments in the United States, provinces in Canada, prefectures in Japan, or cantons in Switzerland are at the meso level and usually more accessible and easier to change than the national bureaucracies of these countries.

In discussing micro-level analysis, we used the example of domestic violence. Recognizing that personal troubles can often be related to public issues, many social scientists look for broader explanations of spousal abuse, such as social conditions at the meso level of society (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 2006). When a pattern of behavior in society occurs with increasing frequency, it cannot be understood solely from the point of view of individual cases or micro-level causes. For instance, sociological findings show that fluctuations in spousal or child abuse at the micro level are related to levels of unemployment in meso-level organizations and macro-level government economic policies.
Frustration resulting in abuse can erupt within families when poor economic conditions make it nearly impossible for people to find a stable and reliable means of supporting themselves and their families. The message here is that economic issues in the society must be addressed in order to decrease domestic violence.

**Macro-Level Analysis.** Studying the largest social units in the social world, called macro-level analysis, involves looking at entire nations, global forces, and international social trends. Macro-level analysis is essential to our understanding of how larger societal forces and global events shape our everyday lives. A natural disaster, such as the recent droughts and floods in North America and West Africa and massive hurricanes in Central America and the Caribbean, may change the foods we can serve at our family dinner table because much of what we consume comes from other parts of the world. (Figure 1.2 shows some of the deadliest natural disasters in 2015.) Likewise, a political conflict on the other side of the planet can lead to war, which means that a member of your family may be called to active duty and sent into harm’s way more than 7,000 miles from your home. Each member of the family may experience individual stress, have trouble concentrating, and feel ill with worry. The entire globe has become an interdependent social unit. If we are to prosper and thrive

**FIGURE 1.2 Natural Disasters Worldwide in 2015**

Source: Münchener Rückversicherungs-Gesellschaft (2016).
Part I: Understanding Our Social World

in the world today, we need to understand connections that go beyond our local communities.

Even patterns such as domestic violence, considered as micro- and meso-level issues earlier, can be examined at the macro level. Violence against women (especially rape) occurs at different rates in different societies, with some having a culture of rape (Kristof and WuDunn 2009). Recent gang rapes of a Danish tourist and young teenagers became headline news and shone a spotlight on the culture and lack of law enforcement in India that encourage violence against women (McCoy 2014). The most consistent predictor of violence against women is a macho conception of masculine roles and personality. Societies or subgroups within society that teach males that the finest expression of their masculinity is physical strength and domination tend to have more battered women (Mayeda 2013).

India is far from the only nation with a culture that generates violence against women. South Africa has one of the highest levels of rape in the world, with one in four men having raped a woman and 46% of those more than once (U.S. Department of State 2015). The men tend to show no remorse because the behavior is “accepted” by their segments of society; it is “macho” (Lindow 2009).

Understanding individual human behavior often requires investigation of the larger societal beliefs and values that support that behavior. Worldwide patterns may tell us something about a social problem and offer new lenses for understanding that problem.

The social world model presented in each chapter illustrates the interplay of micro-, meso-, and macro-level forces related to that chapter’s content. Figure 1.3 shows how this micro-to-macro model should be seen as a continuum.

Distinctions between each level of analysis are not always sharply delineated. The micro level shades into the meso level, and the lines between the meso level and the macro level are blurry on the continuum. Still, it is clear that in some micro-level social units, you know everyone, or at least every member of the social unit is only two degrees of separation away. In other words, every person in the social unit knows someone whom you also know. Try the next “Engaging Sociology” to test your understanding of levels of analysis and the sociological imagination.

We all participate in meso-level social units that are smaller than the nation but that can be huge. For example, thousands or even millions of individuals join organizations such as the NRA, MoveOn.org, or the environmental group 350.org. Those involved participate in dialogues online and contribute money to these organizations. People living thousands of miles from one another united financially and in spirit to support candidates in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. We share connections with the members of these organizations, and our lives are interconnected, even if we never meet face to face.

The macro level is even more removed from the individual, but its impact can change our lives. For example, decisions by lawmakers in Washington, DC, can seem distant, but decisions by Congress and the president may determine whether your own family has health care coverage (and of what quality) and whether the United States will lead or stymie global efforts to address climate change. These government leaders will also determine whether interest rates on federal student loans for U.S. students go up.

The Social World Model and This Book

The social world engulfs each of us from the moment of our birth until we die. Throughout our lives, each of us is part of a set of social relationships that provides guidelines for how we interact with others and how we see ourselves. This does not mean that human behavior is strictly determined by our links to the social world. Humans are more than mere puppets whose behavior is programmed by social structure. It does mean, however, that the individual and the larger social world influence each other. We are influenced by and we have influence on our social environment. The social world is a human creation, and we can and do change that which we create. It acts on us, and we act on it. In this sense, social units are constantly emerging and changing in the course of human action and interaction.
Micro-Meso-Macro

The distinctions between levels of analysis are gray rather than precise. Levels of analysis should be viewed as a continuum—from micro to macro social units. Clear criteria help identify groups at each level. One criterion is size (number of people) of the group. A second is the geographic range of influence:

1. intimate or very close personal relationships (micro);
2. social units in the local community (micro);
3. social units that cover a large geographic region (like a state or commonwealth) and even nationwide groups that—despite size—are still a small portion of the entire nation (meso);
4. the nation itself (macro); and
5. units with global reach (macro).

A third criterion is degree of separation. If you know someone personally, that is one degree of separation. If you do not know the mayor of your town, but you know someone who knows the mayor, that is two degrees of separation. If you have a friend or a relative who knows someone who is a friend or relative of the governor in your state or province, that is three degrees of separation. Some research indicates that every person on the planet is within seven degrees of separation from every other human being. Let us see what these mean for various levels of analysis in our social world.

Micro-level groups are small, local-community social units, such as families and school classrooms, within which everyone knows everyone else or knows someone who also knows another member. So the degree of separation is usually not more than two degrees.

Meso-level groups are social units of intermediate size, such as state governments (with limited geographic range), ethnic groups, and religious denominations (with large geographic range but population sizes that make them a minority of the entire nation). Typically, the group is large enough that members have never heard the names of many other members. Many members may have little access to the leaders, yet the group is not so large as to make the leaders seem distant or unapproachable. Almost anyone within the social unit is only three or four degrees of separation apart. Everyone in the unit knows someone who is an acquaintance of yours.

Macro-level groups are large social units, usually quite bureaucratic, that operate at a national or a global level, such as national governments or international organizations. Most members are unlikely to know or have communicated with the leaders personally or know someone who knows the leaders. The “business” of these groups is of international importance and implication. A macro-level system is one in which most of the members are at least five degrees of separation from one another—that is, they know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows the person in question.

* * * * * * *

Engaging With Sociology

1. Micro social units

2. Meso social units

3. Macro social units

(Continued)
Look at the following list of social units below. Identify which level each group is most likely to belong to: (1) micro, (2) meso, or (3) macro. Why did you answer as you did? The previous definitions should help you make your decisions. Again, some are “on the line” because this is a continuum from micro to macro, and some units could legitimately be placed in more than one group. Which ones are especially “on the line”?

- Your nuclear family
- The United Nations
- A local chapter of the Lions Club or the Rotary Club
- Your high school baseball team
- India
- NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)
- The First Baptist Church in Muncie, Indiana
- The World Bank
- A family reunion
- Google, Inc. (international)
- The Department of Education for the Commonwealth of Kentucky
- The show choir in your local high school
- African Canadians
- The Dineh (Navajo) people
- Canada
- The Republican Party in the United States
- The World Court
- A fraternity at your college
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF)
- The Ministry of Education for Spain
- The Roman Catholic Church (with its headquarters at the Vatican in Rome)
- Australia
- The Chi Omega national sorority
- Boy Scout Troop #187 in Minneapolis, Minnesota
- Al-Qaeda (an international alliance of terrorist organizations)
- The provincial government for the Canadian province of Ontario
- The United States of America

See how your authors rate these at edge.sagepub.com/ballantinecondensed5e.
Throughout this book, we use the social world model as the framework for understanding the social units, processes, and surrounding environment. We look at each social unit and process. We take the unit out, examine it, and then return it to its place in the interconnected social world model so that you can comprehend the whole social world and its parts, like putting a puzzle together. Look for the model at the beginning of every chapter. We will also explain the micro-, meso-, and macro-level dimensions of issues throughout the text.

Our next chapter asks the following: When we say we know something about society, how is it that we know? What is considered evidence in sociology, and what lens (theory) do we use to interpret the data? In the next chapter, we turn to how we gather data to help us test theories to understand and influence the social world.

**WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?**

How can sociology help you see new aspects of your life and change society? Throughout this book, you will find ideas and examples that will help answer these questions. You will learn how to view the social world through a sociological lens and use the **sociological imagination**. Understanding how the social world works from the micro through the meso to the macro level helps us interact more effectively in it. Using the sociological imagination enables us to see how individual troubles can be rooted in social issues and are best addressed with an understanding of the meso or macro level. This knowledge enables us to be better family members, workers, citizens, and members of the global community.

We live in a complex social world with many layers of interaction. If we really want to understand our own lives, we need to comprehend the levels of analysis that affect our lives and the connections between those levels. To do so wisely, we need both objective lenses for viewing this complex social world and valid information (facts) about the society. As the science of society, sociology can provide both tested empirical data and a broad, analytical perspective, as you will learn in the next chapter. Here is a summary of points from Chapter 1.

- **Humans are, at our very core, social animals**—more akin to pack or herd animals than to individualistic cats.
- **Sociology is based on scientific findings**, making it more predictable and reliable than opinions or common-sense beliefs in a particular culture.
- A core idea in sociology is the sociological imagination. It requires that we see how our individual lives and personal troubles are shaped by historical and structural events outside our everyday lives. It also prods us to see how we can influence our society.
- **Sociology is a social science** and, therefore, uses the tools of the sciences to establish credible evidence to understand our social world. As a science, sociology is scientific and objective rather than value laden.
- **Sociology has practical applications**, including those that are essential for the job market.
- **Sociology focuses on social units or groups**, on social structures such as institutions, on social processes that give a social unit its dynamic character, and on their environments.
- The social world model is the organizing theme of this book. Using the sociological imagination, we can understand our social world best by clarifying the interconnections between micro, meso, and macro levels of the social world. Each chapter of this book will examine society at these three levels of analysis.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think of a problem that impacts you personally (e.g., the high cost of tuition, unemployment, or divorce), and explain how you would make sense of it differently if you viewed it as (a) only a personal problem or (b) influenced by a public issue. How do possible solutions to the problem differ depending on how you view it?

2. How can sociology help you become a more informed citizen and better able to understand how government policies impact society?

3. What are three ways the sociological perspective can help you succeed in college and the workforce?

4. Think of some of the ways the social institutions of government and education are connected. Why is it in the interest of the government to support higher education? How has government support (or lack of support) impacted your college experience?

5. Imagine you would like to look at reasons behind the high college dropout rate in the United States. How might your explanations differ based on whether your analysis was on the micro, meso, or macro level? Why? Which level or levels would you focus on for your study? Why?

KEY TERMS

environment 15  
levels of analysis 13  
macro-level analysis 17  
meso-level analysis 16  
micro-level analysis 16  
national society 14  
social institutions 14  
social processes 14  
social structure 13  
social units 13  
social world model 13  
sociological imagination 8  
sociology 5

CONTRIBUTING TO OUR SOCIAL WORLD: WHAT CAN WE DO?

At the end of this and all subsequent chapters, you will find suggestions for work, service learning, internships, and volunteering that encourage you to apply the ideas discussed in the chapter. Suggestions for Chapter 1 focus on student organizations for sociology majors and nonmajors.

At the Local (Micro) Level

- **Student organizations and clubs** enable you to meet other students interested in sociology, carry out group activities, get to know faculty members, and attend presentations by guest speakers. These clubs are usually not limited to sociology majors. If no such organization exists for sociology students at your school, consider forming one with the help of a faculty member. Sociologists also have an undergraduate honors society, Alpha Kappa Delta (AKD). Visit the AKD website at alphakappadelta.org to learn more about the society and what it takes to qualify for membership or to form a chapter.

At the Regional (Meso) Level

- **State, regional, and specialty (education, criminology, social problems, and so forth) sociological associations** are especially student friendly and feature publications and sessions at their annual meetings specifically for undergraduates. The American Sociological Association lists regional and specialty...
organizations and their website addresses, with direct links to their home pages at www.asanet.org/about/Aligned_Associations.cfm.

**At the National and Global (Macro) Levels**

- *The American Sociological Association (ASA)* is the leading professional organization of sociologists in the United States. Visit the ASA website at www.asanet.org, and take a look around it. You will find many programs and initiatives of special interest to students. If you are interested in becoming a sociologist, be sure to look at the links under the heading “News on the Profession.” ASA also sponsor an Honors Program at the annual meeting that introduces students to the profession and gives students a heads-up on being successful in sociology. For more information, go to www.asanet.org/students/honors.cfm.

- *The International Sociological Association (ISA)* serves sociologists from around the world. Every four years, the ISA sponsors a large meeting (Toronto, Canada, in July 2018). Specialty groups within ISA hold smaller conferences throughout the world during the other years. Check out www.isa-sociology.org.

For chapter-specific resources, including Frontline, TED, and YouTube videos; self-quizzes; Web exercises; and more, visit edge.sagepub.com/ballantinecondensed5e.