Have you ever wanted to know why more women than men graduate from college today? Why college tuition is so expensive? What you can do to improve your chances of landing a desirable job after college? Why the number of hate groups in the United States has increased by 30 percent since 2000? What types of jobs will be most available when you graduate? Why people vote for certain political candidates (or do not vote at all)? How you can make a positive impact on society? If so, you have chosen the right subject! Sociology can help you answer all these questions—and raise some new ones.

What Is Sociology?

So, what is sociology? Sociology is the scientific study of society, including how individuals both shape and are shaped by society. Notice in this definition that people are active beings, shapers of society, but they are also affected by society. It's important to remember that society influences us in myriad ways—how we think, what we notice, what we believe to be true, how we see ourselves, and so on. But it is simultaneously vital to realize that we help shape the society in which we live. This duality is at the heart of sociology and our daily lives—whether we are aware of it or not.

Shaping and Being Shaped by Society

The life of Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize winner in history, provides an excellent example of this duality. No one can deny that Malala is an extraordinary young woman. Her personal bravery and selflessness are awe inspiring. Just nine months after she was shot in the head by the Taliban for publicly promoting education for girls in Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai declared in an address to the United Nations Youth Assembly that "one child, one teacher, one book, and one pen, can change the world” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rNhZu3ttIU). Her organization, the Malala Fund, has provided the means for many other girls to gain an education. Clearly, Malala has shown the power of an individual to influence society.
Kathleen Odell Korgen

I slept most of the way through the SOC 101 course I took in college. The professor lectured and we took notes (or not). That SOC 101 course was the last sociology class I took until I found a sociology graduate program in social justice and social economy that encouraged sociologists to put sociological tools into action. In that program, I learned that sociology could show me how I can change society. As a researcher, I have worked on issues related to race relations and racial identity, evaluated social justice efforts and sociology programs, and helped create introductory textbooks that get students to do sociology as they learn it.

As a sociology teacher, I want students to know—right away—all that sociology offers them—and society. A major part of my work has been to help students use sociological tools to make a positive impact on society. In my classes, from SOC 101 to Public Sociology and Civic Engagement, students don't just learn about sociology—they become sociologists in action.

Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head and, later, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work promoting education for girls. Her life helps us see how we both shape and are shaped by our societies. Malala, however, just like the rest of us, is a product of her society. Imagine if, instead of growing up in the Swat Valley of Pakistan during the time of the Taliban, she grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey. Her life would have been very different. She would not have been shot by the Taliban and she would not have created the Malala Fund. Indeed, the Malala raised in New Jersey may not have even been aware that girls in many areas of the world face violence for going to school. Sociology helps us understand the impact of society on us and how we can work with others, as Malala is doing now, to solve the social issues facing our societies.

Consider This
How have the time period and the nation in which you live influenced your life? How might your life be different if you lived during a different time period or another nation?

The Origins and Current Uses of Sociology

Sociology developed out of the need to understand and address social issues. The roots of sociology are based in efforts to understand and to help control the impact of major societal changes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in Europe and the United States, organized people challenged monarchies and the dominance of religion. The Industrial Revolution dramatically changed where people lived and how they worked. Social change occurred everywhere, and philosophers and scientists offered new answers to life's questions. Many began to believe science could help leaders understand and shape society. August Comte (1798–1857), the French philosopher who gave sociology its name, envisioned that sociology would be the “queen science” that could help steer society safely through great changes.
Chapter 1
Training Your Sociological Eye

Today, sociologists help us understand and address challenges like economic inequality, environmental racism, sexism, the social dimensions of global climate change, war, terrorism, and so on. Sociologists work in a variety of settings, including colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations (e.g., environmental groups, public health programs, and community-based organizations), government, and marketing, sales, social services, and the human resources departments of businesses and nonprofit organizations. People in every profession benefit from sociological training, and employers value employees with sociological skills.

A survey of employers commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities reveals that students who study sociology tend to gain precisely the skills employers seek. For example,

- Ninety-five percent of employers polled noted that they seek employees who can promote change in the workplace.
- Seventy-five percent of the employers in the survey said they wish colleges placed greater emphasis on teaching complex problem solving, critical thinking skills, and how to apply knowledge in real-world settings.
- Most employers surveyed encouraged colleges to teach students how to conduct research and evidence-based analysis (American Sociological Association 2014).

In this course alone, you will have the opportunity to learn and use many of these skills. In most sociology undergraduate programs, you can gain and use all of them!

Check Your Understanding

1. What career do you plan on pursuing? If you are not sure yet, think of any profession with which you are familiar (e.g., lawyer, marketing director, police officer, entrepreneur, Wall Street banker, environmental activist, social worker, teacher).
2. How can gaining a sociological perspective help you to succeed in that career?

Changing How You View the World

This sociology course will help you develop your sociological eye and your sociological imagination. Together, they allow you to notice and make sense of social patterns in ways that enable you to understand how society works—and to help influence it.

The Sociological Eye

A sociological eye enables you to see what others may not notice. It allows you to peer beneath the surface of a situation and discern social patterns (Collins 1998). For example, there is a woman academic who conducts evaluations of various academic departments...
every year. Often, she does so as part of a team. She has noticed that, whenever she is paired with a man, the clients always look at the man when speaking to them both. As a sociologist, she knows what she is experiencing is gender bias. In general, both men and women tend to defer to men and pay more attention to them, particularly in business settings.

Once you start paying attention to gender patterns (e.g., who talks more in classes or meetings, who interrupts whom, etc.) or racial patterns (e.g., who eats lunch with whom in the cafeteria, what student organizations tend to attract specific racial groups, who is more likely to be stopped by the police, etc.), you won’t be able to stop noticing them. Noticing these patterns can make you more aware of how your campus and the larger society work. Once you have this awareness, you can then take steps to change these patterns, if you so choose. The woman we referred to earlier, for example, now often prepares herself to talk more (and more authoritatively) when paired with a man and teaches others to make an effort to pay as much attention to women as to men. You will learn more about why we tend to pay more attention to men in Chapter 8!

**Consider This**

Why do you think we need a sociological eye to notice some social patterns? Why aren’t social patterns obvious to everyone all the time?

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**The Sociological Imagination**

Once you develop your sociological eye, you can also expand your sociological imagination, the ability to connect what is happening in your own life and in the lives of other individuals to social patterns in the larger society. For example, you may be having a difficult time paying for college. This is a challenge for many individuals. You may address it by taking out loans (and more loans), working while going to school, transferring to a more affordable school, and so forth. So far, these are all individual responses to the problem of high tuition. Looking at the problem with a sociological eye, however, can help you see that this is not just a hardship for a few individuals. You will begin to observe a pattern—many college students across the nation face the same issue. Now you can use your sociological imagination to connect your personal problem (how to pay for the high cost of your college education) with the social issue of the high cost of college throughout the United States.

As Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show, approximately 70 percent of college graduates accept student loans, taking on an average debt of just over $35,000. As government support for higher education drops and wages remain stagnant, more students and families are resorting to loans to pay for college (Berman 2015).

Once you begin to look at the high cost of college as a societal issue, you can investigate its causes. You can then work with other students and families across the nation to press elected officials to develop state and national solutions to this societal problem.

C. Wright Mills (1959:1) developed the concept of the sociological imagination to describe how our individual lives relate to social forces. The sociological imagination gives us the ability to recognize the relationship between our own biographies and the society in which we live. Mills explained the impact of society on individuals this way:

> When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. . . . When wars happen,

You can use your sociological eye to notice racial, gender, and social status patterns in the cafeteria scenes in the classic film *Mean Girls*—and in most real-life cafeterias.

You can use your sociological eye to notice racial, gender, and social status patterns in the cafeteria scenes in the classic film *Mean Girls*—and in most real-life cafeterias.
FIGURE 1.1
Higher Education Students Graduating with Loans


FIGURE 1.2
Average Debt per Borrower by Graduating Class

an insurance salesperson becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar operator; a wife or husband lives alone; a child grows up without a parent. . . . Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Our lives are shaped by the society in which we live. Yet, we can also help shape that society. Nations at war need individuals to fight in their armies. Industrial societies need both factory workers and investors. Postindustrial societies cannot succeed without highly skilled workers. Individuals choose how to behave within their social environments.

The Fallacy of the Individualistic Perspective

We often forget, however, that our choices are limited by our environments. In the United States today, the myth that we, as individuals, determine our own lives permeates society. From this individualistic perspective, whether we succeed or fail depends primarily on our own efforts. For example, you have probably heard of the saying that, in the United States, anyone who works hard enough can “make it.” A sociological eye quickly sees that this individualistic perspective is flawed. Some people have fewer hurdles and more opportunities in life than others. For example, take two students with the same level of innate intelligence. Both work hard but one goes to a school with many AP courses, where students are expected and encouraged to apply to selective colleges. The other student goes to a school with few AP courses, where teachers and administrators focus on preventing kids from dropping out of high school rather than on getting them into selective colleges. Chances are, the second student may not even be aware of all the schools to which the first student applies. His or her chances of “making it” are not the same—no matter how hard they both work.

Check Your Understanding

- What does a sociological eye allow you to do?
- What can you do with a sociological imagination?
- According to C. Wright Mills, what do you need to understand the life of an individual?
- How does the sociological eye help us to see the fallacy of the individualistic perspective in the United States?

Sociology as a Social Science

Sociology is a social science, a scientific discipline that studies how society works. As social scientists, sociologists follow rules that work to ensure that our research is transparent and replicable and that others can confirm or refute our findings. For example, as we seek to better understand how society operates, sociologists use theories and the scientific research process to formulate research questions and collect and analyze data.

Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical perspectives are paradigms, or ways of viewing the world. They help us make sense of the social patterns we observe, and they determine the questions we ask. Different theories have different foci and ask different questions about the social world. Some ask questions about social order and
cohesion (e.g., How do the various parts of society work together?), some ask questions about problems in society (e.g., Why is there inequality?) and some ask questions about the ways we see ourselves in relation to others (e.g., How do our interactions with others influence how we see ourselves?). You will learn more about the most important theoretical perspectives that sociologists use in Chapter 2 and about topic-specific (middle-range) theories that fall under their respective umbrellas throughout the book.

The Scientific Research Process

To understand how society operates and to test our perspectives and theories about how society works, sociologists must collect and analyze data. We do so in systematic ways that we clearly describe and offer for critique from other social scientists and the general public. The purpose of sociological research is to constantly learn more about how society works. Doing so in open, systematic ways allows others to replicate our research process and to support our conclusions or reveal flaws in our data-gathering process and findings. Together, we gain a better, scientifically sound understanding of our society.

Sometimes, our findings are unexpected. For example, a sociologist who uses a theoretical lens that focuses on inequality and group conflict may be surprised to learn that a corporation she is studying has a high level of camaraderie and evidence of strong teamwork among workers at all status levels. If our findings consistently diverge from our theoretical explanations, we need to adjust out theories accordingly. Sociologists are in the business of creating useful theories based on good generalizations.

Check Your Understanding

- What makes sociology a social science?
- How do sociologists use theoretical perspectives and theories?
- Why do sociologists collect data in open, systematic ways?

Differentiating between Good Generalizations and Stereotypes

Has anyone said to you that “you shouldn’t generalize”? That was probably right after you said some disparaging remark about all the people from a particular town, all the movies starring a particular

Doing Sociology 1.2

Channeling C. Wright Mills

In this exercise, you will research and explain to a peer how your life would have been different in a past century.

Recall what C. Wright Mills said about how the society in which we live influences our lives. Imagine you were living in the society you are in now 100 or 200 years ago (pick one). Look up information on your demographic group (people of your same age, gender, ethnicity, race, etc.) during this time period. The following websites may be useful resources:

- www.wic.org/misc/history.htm

http://pages.pomona.edu/~vis04747/h21/readings/Gutman_Work_Culture_Society.pdf

1. Using the information you found (be sure to cite your sources), describe how, if you lived during that time period, your life would be different in terms of how you would be perceived by (a) your parents, (b) other members of society, and (c) yourself.
2. Share your answer to question 1 with a classmate.
3. How did having good sources of information and examples help you make your point in a more convincing way? How does this help show the importance of using solid social scientific data to support an argument?
actor, or all roads in New Jersey. Generalizations, or statements used to describe groups of people or things in general terms, with the understanding that there can always be exceptions, tend to have a bad reputation among the general public. Sociologists, however, generalize all the time as they recognize and point out social patterns in society. We, however, aim to make good generalizations and avoid stereotyping.

Stereotypes

Predetermined ideas about particular groups of people (e.g., all Irish are drunks, all Asians are good at math) are called stereotypes and are passed on through hearsay or small samples and held regardless of evidence. Often, they are used to excuse discriminatory treatment. Stereotypes are bad generalizations. Some may be closer to the truth than others, but none is based on solid evidence.

Movies and television shows provide excellent examples of racial stereotypes. In one scene in the film Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle, the White, male boss hands Harold, a Korean American, a bunch of his work—so he can start his weekend early. The boss holds a stereotype of Asians that makes him think Harold (and all other Asians) “live for” crunching numbers. Of course, however, movie viewers know that work is the last thing Harold wants to do that weekend. More recently, in the television show Awkward, the only main Asian character, Ming, was relegated to stories about the sneaky, brilliant, and controlling “Asian mafia” at her high school and largely kept out of the rom-com scenes occupied by her White co-stars. After three seasons, both Ming and the Asian mafia were written out of the show—and seemingly not missed by any of the White characters!

Good Generalizations

Good generalizations, unlike stereotypes, are based on social scientific research. For example, one common stereotype is that women are “chatty Cathys” and talk incessantly. A good generalization, on the contrary, is that in mixed-sex conversations, men tend to talk and interrupt more than women. Women ask more questions than men and tend to work harder at fostering conversation, but it is men who tend to dominate verbal interactions (Gamble and Gamble 2015).

Did you notice how the generalizations in the paragraph above are phrased? Unlike the stereotype about “chatty Cathys,” they describe what social scientists have found about speaking patterns without denigrating one sex or the other. Good generalizations are used to describe rather than judge groups of people.

Good generalizations also change or are discarded with new information. For example, the generalization that “most people in the United States oppose same-sex marriage” was once true but no longer qualifies as a good generalization. As our generalizations change with new data, so do our research questions. For example, we may now want to ask, What led to this change in attitudes toward same-sex marriage? And, will this acceptance of same-sex marriage also lead to national legislation to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people from discrimination?

Check Your Understanding

• On what are stereotypes based?
• How do sociologists create good generalizations?
• How does new information affect (a) stereotypes and (b) good generalizations?
• For what purpose do sociologists use generalizations?
The Obligations of Sociology

The earliest sociologists used sociology to find ways to understand and to improve society. In 1896, Albion Small, the founder of the first accredited department of sociology in the United States, implored his fellow sociologists to do so with these words:

I would have American scholars, especially in the social sciences, declare their independence of do-nothing traditions. I would have them repeal the law of custom which bars marriage of thought with action. I would have them become more profoundly and sympathetically scholarly by enriching the wisdom which comes from knowing with the larger wisdom which comes from doing. (Small 1896:564)

W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the key founders of sociology, needed no prodding. An African American, Harvard-trained scholar, Du Bois faced rejection when applying for tenured faculty positions at White colleges and universities due to his race. Undaunted, he spent his career leading research studies at Atlanta University, writing prolifically, and organizing civil rights efforts.

Throughout his long career, Du Bois carried out a combination of research and activism, achieving groundbreaking work in both areas. In the late nineteenth century, Du Bois conducted the first...
large-scale, empirical sociological research in the United States, with the clear goal of refuting racist ideas about African Americans (Morris 2015). Later, he helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and tirelessly promoted civil rights for African Americans. In the spirit of Du Bois and Small, Randall Collins (1998) has described two core commitments of sociology.

The Two Core Commitments

The first core commitment of sociology is to use the sociological eye to observe social patterns. The second requires noticing patterns of injustice and taking action to challenge those patterns. Collins and the sociologists who have authored this book believe that sociology should be used to make a positive impact on society. If you have developed a sociological eye, you are obligated to use it for the good of society. For example, if we perceive that in over half of the states in the United States, it is still legal to fire people based on their sexual orientation (in nonreligious institutions as well as in religious organizations), we should work to address that injustice.

Check Your Understanding

• For what purpose did the earliest sociologists use sociology?

• Why did W. E. B. Du Bois conduct large-scale empirical research in the United States?

• What are the two core commitments of sociology?

The Benefits of Sociology

Developing a sociological eye and gaining a sociological perspective will benefit both you and society. You will notice social patterns that many others cannot see. Even if these patterns are unpleasant (sexism, racism, ableism, etc.), noticing and understanding them will help you develop ways of dealing with them in your own life. Forewarned is forearmed. You can also see patterns that you can proactively use to your advantage (e.g., what careers will be most in demand soon, how to gain social capital useful in the job market, etc.). Through gaining a sociological perspective, you will learn how to act more effectively in groups and with members of different cultures. You will also gain the ability to collect, analyze, and explain information and to influence your society.

The last points concerning what you, personally, will gain from a sociological perspective relate to how sociology can help you contribute to society. Just knowing how society operates and how individuals are both shaped by and shapers of society can make you a more effective member of your community. You can learn how to work with others to improve your campus, workplace, neighborhood, and society. As seen in the following Sociologists in Action box, William Edmundson provides an excellent example of how sociology students can use sociological tools to benefit both individuals and society.

Sociology and Democracy

In democratic societies, it is particularly important for citizens who vote in elections to understand how society works and to develop the ability to notice social patterns. It is also vital that they be able to understand the difference between good information and fake news. Can you tell what news to trust? Checking to see if the data described in a news source were gained through the scientific research process and knowing how to tell the difference between good generalizations and stereotypes will help you discern real news from fake news.

Fake news became increasingly common during the 2016 presidential campaign. One piece “BREAKING: ‘Tens of thousands’ of fraudulent Clinton votes found in Ohio warehouse” was shared more than 6 million times on social media before the election. Cameron Harris, a recent college graduate,

Consider This

Can you see yourself fulfilling the two core commitments of sociology in response to a particular issue? If yes, both or only one? Why? If not, why not? Do you think most of your peers would be able and willing to do so? Why?
Chapter 1  Training Your Sociological Eye

Sociologists in Action

The Clothesline Project

William Edmundson

In the fall semester of 2015, I helped lead the Clothesline Project on Virginia Wesleyan College’s campus. I was able to do so through Dr. Alison Marganski’s Family Violence: Causes, Consequences, and Responses course. The Clothesline Project is a community education campaign on the issue of violence against women—see www.clotheslineproject.info/ (note: our class also extended this to include other forms/types of family violence to be more inclusive of other victimization experiences).

Part of my contribution to the Clothesline Project were “Myth versus Facts” bookmarks; one focused on the victim while another focused on the abuser, and both displayed common myths with corresponding facts as well as local resources available both on and off campus. My classmates and I distributed them to students, staff, and faculty who stopped by the weeklong event to make a T-shirt to support the project. Through creating and distributing the bookmarks, I educated myself as well as others to recognize myths about domestic violence and to replace them with the facts they serve to mask.

Throughout our class, my classmates and I learned of the need for education with respect to family violence, including violence against women. The Clothesline Project enabled those directly affected by such violence to tell their stories through T-shirts they created and provided a form for the community to learn more about—and take a stand against—domestic violence. One victim both created a shirt and came into our class to share her story.

Additional course-related activities included advertising the event, running the T-shirt creation table, and displaying the created T-shirts at the end of the event.

Toward the end of the project, our class took all of the almost 100 T-shirts created during the weeklong event and hung them up across a walkway on campus. Hanging up the shirts served to both raise awareness and provide a medium for participants’ voices to be heard. The strategic placement of those shirts allowed the entire campus community to gain exposure to the messages created by the participants.

My experience as a leader in the Clothesline Project taught me the extent of planning and networking required for such community outreach events. As a class, we were able to form connections with local organizations, such as the Samaritan House and the YWCA, whose members also distributed materials at the event. Hosting the Clothesline Project provided me with valuable organizing experience and helped me to create valuable networks with local organizations for potential volunteering positions, internships, or even jobs in the future. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from the Clothesline Project was just how big of a role I could play in educating Virginia Wesleyan College about societal issues from a sociological perspective.

William Edmundson is a criminal justice major at Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk, Virginia.

created a fake news site, ChristianTimesNewspaper.com, and included a picture of some ballot boxes in a warehouse (no one could tell that the warehouse was in England, not Ohio) to make his story appear “real” to viewers who did not realize the need to look into the veracity of the news source or the information described in the story (Shane 2017). The completely fabricated story took off. It’s hard to know how much this one story influenced the election, but it was far from the only fake news story sweeping across social media before Americans went to vote (you may remember “Pizzagate,” one of the more famous of the fake news stories leading up the election) (Fisher, Cox, and Hermann 2016). Today, a sociologically informed public is more necessary than ever for a democratic society.

Consider This
Give an example of how you can use sociology to understand how society works and to help shape society.
Sociology and Careers

Finally, as noted earlier, sociological knowledge is useful in any career you can imagine—including teaching, business management, politics, human resources, medical administration, social work, nonprofit management, and marketing. For example, to be effective, social workers need to understand the populations they serve and the structural and cultural forces affecting them. A marketer must have the research skills to learn what appeals to different groups and how to advertise to each most persuasively. Managers need cultural competency to create a motivated and engaged workforce. From knowing what job to apply for, what skills you need to gain it, and how to conduct yourself in the workplace to advance, sociological skills can help you to succeed in the workforce. In each of the chapters that follow, take note of the sociological skills you gain and in what professions you might use them.

Check Your Understanding

- How can sociology benefit individuals?
- How can sociology benefit society, particularly democratic societies?
- How might you use sociology in your career?

Conclusion

In this introductory chapter, you learned that sociology, the scientific study of society, provides myriad benefits to both individuals and to society. We now turn to how sociologists make sense of how society operates by looking at the different major sociological perspectives. As you will see, each perspective views the world in distinct ways. As you read the chapter, think about which perspective(s) make the most sense to you.
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# Review

## 1.1 What is sociology?

Sociology is the scientific study of society, including how individuals both shape and are shaped by society.

## 1.2 What do the sociological eye and the sociological imagination allow you to do?

A sociological eye enables you to see what others may not notice. It allows you to peer beneath the surface of a situation and discern social patterns. The sociological imagination gives you the ability to connect what is happening in your own life and in the lives of others to social patterns in the larger society.

## 1.3 What key aspects of sociology make it a social science?

Sociologists use theories and the scientific research process to formulate research questions and collect and analyze data to better understand how society operates.

## 1.4 How can you tell the difference between a good generalization and a stereotype?

Good generalizations, unlike stereotypes, are based on social scientific research, used to describe rather than judge groups, and change or are discarded with new information.

## 1.5 What are the core commitments of sociology?

The first of the two core commitments is to use the sociological eye to observe social patterns. The second commitment requires us to notice patterns of injustice and take action to challenge those patterns. Sociology should be used to make a positive impact on society.

## 1.6 How can sociology benefit both individuals and society?

Through gaining a sociological perspective, you will learn to notice and deal with patterns others do not recognize; act more effectively in groups and with members of different cultures; collect, analyze, and explain information; and influence your society.

Sociological knowledge is useful in any career you can imagine.

In democratic societies, it is particularly important for citizens to develop the ability to notice social patterns and how to tell the difference between good generalizations and stereotypes.

## Key Terms

- core commitments 12
- generalizations 10
- sociological eye 5
- sociological imagination 6
- sociology 3
- stereotypes 10
We all have perspectives or ways of seeing the world, but few of us are aware of alternative points of view.

**Learning Questions**

2.1 Why and how do sociologists use theoretical perspectives?

2.2 What is structural functionalism?

2.3 What is a conflict perspective?

2.4 What is symbolic interactionism?

2.5 How do structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interactionism work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?