1

Taking a New Look at a Familiar World

- Sociology and the Individual
- The Insights of Sociology
- The Sociological Imagination

André graduated from college in 2019. He had been a model student. When not studying, he found time to help kids read at the local elementary school and actively participated in student government at his own school. He got along well with his professors, his grades were excellent, he made the dean's list all 4 years, and he graduated Phi Beta Kappa. As a computer science major with a minor in economics, André thought his future was set: He would land a job at a top software company or perhaps a stock brokerage firm and work his way up the ladder so that he'd be earning a six-figure income by the time he was 30.

But when André entered the job market and began applying for jobs, things didn't go exactly according to plan. Despite his credentials, nobody seemed willing to hire him full-time. He was able to survive by taking temporary freelance programming jobs here and there and working nights at the Gap. Although most of his classmates had similar difficulties finding jobs, André began to question his own abilities: "Do I lack the skills employers are looking for?

Am I not trying hard enough? What the heck is wrong with me?" His friends and family were as encouraging as they could be, but some secretly wondered if André wasn't as smart as they'd thought he was.

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

Michael was stunned. "What did I do?" he asked her. "I thought things were going great. Is it something I said? Something I did? Tell me. I can change."

She said no, he hadn't done anything wrong; they had simply grown apart. She told him she just didn't feel as strongly about him as she used to.

Even though he let his friends talk him into immediately changing his relationship status on

Facebook, Michael was devastated. They tried to comfort him. "She wasn't any good for you anyway," they said. "We always thought she was a little creepy. She probably couldn't be in a serious relationship with anybody. It wasn't your fault; it was hers."

In both of these stories, notice how people immediately try to explain an unfortunate situation by focusing on the personal characteristics and attributes of the individuals involved. André blames himself for not being able to land a job in his field; others, although supportive, harbor doubts about his intelligence and drive. Michael wonders what he did to sour his relationship with Grace; his friends question Grace's psychological stability. Such reactions are not uncommon. We have a marked tendency to rely on **individualistic explanations**, attributing people's achievements and disappointments to their personal qualities.

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

But by focusing exclusively on such individual "deficiencies," we risk overlooking the broader societal factors that may have affected André's job prospects. For instance, the employment situation for college graduates like André was part of a broader economic trend that began with the global financial crisis of 2008 and continued to suppress the job market by the time he got his degree. When I started writing this chapter (before the global COVID-19 pandemic had created massive unemployment), 3.5% of American adults (about 5.8 million people) were officially unemployed, and about 21% of them had been unemployed for at least 27 weeks. Incidentally, the official unemployment rate only counts people who have been actively seeking employment for the past month. Thus it doesn't include the 4.5 million people who were employed part-time even though they wanted to work full-time, the 1.4 million "marginally attached" unemployed people who had looked for a job sometime in the past year (just not in the past month), and the 412,000 "discouraged" workers who had lost hope and given up looking for employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019b). So you see, even though the unemployment rate is lower than it was, say, 10 years ago, a lot of people remain in André's boat.

But he's got a college education. That should help, right? Well, it turns out that college degrees are not necessarily a guarantee of fruitful employment. Even though the economy was quite strong up until 2020 and the job prospects for young graduates had begun to brighten, the unemployment rate for new college graduates is higher than it is for the general population and has remained fairly stable over the past decade: 5.6% today compared with 5.5% in 2007 (the year prior to the Great Recession). In addition, the *under*employment rate (which includes graduates working in jobs that don't require a college degree) remains higher than it was prior to the Great Recession (11.9% compared to 9.6% in 2008) and much higher than it was in 2000 (7.1%). And 1 out of 10 recent college graduates is neither employed nor pursuing more education in graduate or professional school (Kroeger & Gould, 2017).

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

However, starting salaries for college graduates have stagnated in recent years. In fact, the average wages for young college graduates are only 1.4% higher than they were in 2000. Just 25% of employed college graduates work in a job that provides retirement or pension benefits (Kroeger & Gould, 2017). To make money matters worse, 44.7 million Americans have student loan debt. Those who graduated in 2018 carry an average debt of $29,800. In fact, Americans owe $521 billion *more* in student loan debt than the total U.S. credit card debt (Student Loan Hero, 2019). As a

consequence, one recent survey found that 35% of college graduates now consider themselves working or lower class, compared to only 20% in 1983. Over that same period of time, the percentage of graduates who consider themselves middle or upper class dropped from 80% to 64% (Boak & Swanson, 2019).

So you see, André's employability in his chosen field and his chances of earning a good living were as much a result of the economic forces operating at the time he began looking for a job as of any of his personal qualifications. Had he graduated only 10 years earlier—during the Great Recession, when the unemployment rate hovered around 10%—his job prospects would have been much worse. But had he graduated 2 or 3 years later—when employment opportunities are projected to improve even more for graduates in his field—his prospects would have been much brighter.

And what about Michael and Grace? It seems perfectly reasonable to conclude that something about either of them or the combination of the two caused their breakup. We tend to view dating relationships—not to mention marriages—as successes or failures based solely on the traits or actions of the two people involved.

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

When people believe they have no better alternative, they tend to stay with their present partners, even if they are not particularly satisfied. When people think that better relationships are available to them, they may become less committed to staying in their present ones. Indeed, people's perceptions of what characterizes a good relationship (such as fairness, compatibility, or affection) are less likely to determine when and if it ends than the presence or absence of favorable alternatives (Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990). Research shows that the risk of a relationship ending increases as the supply of potential alternative relationships increases (South & Lloyd, 1995).

In addition, Grace's decision to leave could have been indirectly affected by the sheer number of potentially obtainable partners—a result of shifts in the birthrate 20 years or so earlier. There are roughly 126 U.S. men between 25 and 34 who are single, divorced, or widowed for every 100 women in the same categories (Wang & Parker, 2014). For a single, heterosexual woman like Grace, such a surplus of college-age men increases the likelihood that she would eventually find a better alternative to Michael. Fifty years ago, however, when there were 180 single men for every 100 single women, her chances would have been even better. The number of available alternatives can also vary geographically. For instance, Michael's prospects would improve if he were living in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where there are 72 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women, but his chances would sink if he lived in Mansfield, Ohio, where there are 215 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends, 2014). In sum, Michael's interpersonal value, and therefore the stability of his relationship with Grace, may have suffered not because of anything he did but because of population forces over which he had little, if any, control.

Let's take this notion beyond Grace and Michael's immediate dating network. For instance, the very characteristics and features that people consider desirable (or undesirable) in the first place reflect the values of the larger culture in which they live. Fashions and tastes are constantly changing, making particular characteristics (hairstyle, physique, clothing), behaviors (smoking, drinking, sharing feelings), or life choices (educational attainment, occupation, political affiliation) more or less attractive. And broad economic forces

can affect intimate choices even further. In China, where there are about 41 million more unmarried young men than women (Tsai, 2012), single women can be especially choosy when it comes to romantic partners, often requiring that suitors be employed and own their own homes before they'll even consider them for a date (Jacobs, 2011).

The moral of these two stories is simple: To understand experiences in our personal lives, we must move past individual traits and examine broader societal characteristics and trends. External features beyond our immediate awareness and control often exert as much influence on the circumstances of our day-to-day lives as our "internal" qualities. We can't begin to explain an individual's employability without examining current and past economic trends that affect the number of jobs available and the number of people who are looking for work. We can't begin to explain why relationships work or don't work without addressing the broader interpersonal network and culture in which they are embedded. By the same token, we can't begin to explain people's ordinary, everyday thoughts and actions without examining the social forces that influence them.

SOCIOLOGY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Herein lies the fundamental theme of **sociology**—the systematic study of human societies—and the theme that will guide us throughout this book: Everyday social life—our thoughts, actions, feelings, decisions, interactions, and so on—is the product of a complex interplay between societal forces and personal characteristics. To explain why people are the way they are, believe the things they believe, or do the things they do, we must understand the interpersonal, historical, cultural, technological, organizational, and global environments they inhabit. To understand either individuals or society, we must understand both (C. W. Mills, 1959).

Of course, seeing the relationship between individuals and social forces is not always so easy. The United States is a society built on the image of the rugged, self-reliant individual. Not surprisingly, it is also a society dominated by individualistic understandings of human behavior that seek to explain problems and processes by focusing exclusively on the character, the psychology, or even the biochemistry of each person. Consequently, most of us simply take for granted that what we choose to do, say, feel, and think are private phenomena. Everyday life seems to be a series of free personal choices. After all, we choose what to major in, what to wear when we go out, what and when to eat, who our mates will be, and so on.

But how free are these decisions? Think about all the times your actions have been dictated or at least influenced by social circumstances over which you had little control. Have you ever felt that because of your age or gender or race, certain opportunities were closed to you? Your ability to legally drive a car, drink alcohol, or vote, for instance, is determined by society's prevailing definition of age. When you're older, you may be forced into retirement despite your skills and desire to continue working. Gender profoundly affects your choices, too. Some occupations, such as bank executive and engineer, are still overwhelmingly male, whereas others, such as registered nurse and preschool teacher, are overwhelmingly female. Likewise, the doctrines of your religion may limit your behavioral choices. For a devout Catholic, premarital sex or even divorce is unlikely. Each day during the holy month of Ramadan, a strict Muslim must abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. An Orthodox Jew would never dream of drinking milk and eating meat at the same meal.

Then there's the matter of personal style—your choices in hairstyle, dress, music, videos, and the like. Large-scale marketing strategies can actually create a demand for particular products or images. Your tastes, and therefore your choices as a consumer, are often influenced by decisions made in far-off corporate boardrooms. Would Ariana Grande, Post Malone, Taylor Swift, or Cardi B have become as popular as they are without a tightly managed and slickly packaged publicity program designed to appeal to adolescents and preadolescents? One California company called Jukin

Media is the leader in a new industry that determines whether your web video will go viral. Once its researchers determine that a video of, say, a baby tasting lemons for the first time or dogs and parakeets becoming friends is good enough, the company contacts the clip's owner and purchases the licensing rights. Then it's just a matter of time before the video is splashed all over the Internet, becoming what millions of us think is the month's hot new meme (Kelles, 2017).

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

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

Government and politics affect our personal lives, too. A political decision made at the local, regional, national, or even international level may result in the closing of a government agency you depend on, make the goods and services to which you have grown accustomed more expensive or less available, reduce the size of your paycheck after taxes are taken out, or—when conditions are extreme—limit your ability to leave your house for nonessential activities. Workplace family-leave policies or health insurance regulations established by the government may affect your decision whether and when to have a baby or to undergo the elective surgery you've been putting off. If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, federal and state governments can determine whether you can be fired from your job simply because of your sexual orientation. In the United States, decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court can increase or limit your ability to control your fertility, sue an employer for discrimination, use your property however you please, carry a concealed weapon in public, legally marry, or keep the details of your life a private matter.

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

- In 2011, a massive earthquake and deadly tsunami crippled many Japanese companies that manufacture car parts, resulting in a drop in automobile production in U.S. plants. That same year, violent protests in Arab countries like Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen sparked fears of reduced oil imports and drove U.S. gasoline prices up over $4 a gallon.

- In the fall of 2019, a deadly outbreak of COVID-19 began in China. Within months it had spread globally, infecting (as of summer 2020) millions and killing hundreds of thousands. Even though the virus posed a greater risk to some than to others, all Americans' lives were changed forever. Travel restrictions (first internationally, then domestically), mandatory "shelter in place"

orders, the closing of schools and universities, and the virtual shutting down of the entire economy became the new normal.

- Between 2015 and 2019, ISIS attacks killed several hundred people in France, Belgium, Turkey, England, Australia, Sri Lanka, and other places around the world. Following each attack, many cities in the United States heightened police security in popular public venues. In fact, terrorist attacks in foreign countries routinely result in travel restrictions and increased safety measures here.

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

THE INSIGHTS OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociologists do not deny that individuals make choices or that they must take personal responsibility for those choices. But they are quick to point out that we cannot fully understand the things happening in our lives, private and personal though they may be, without examining the influence of the people, events, and societal features that surround us. By showing how social processes can shape us, and how individual action can in turn affect those processes, sociology provides unique insight into the taken-for-granted personal events and the large-scale cultural and global processes that make up our everyday existence.

Other disciplines study human life, too. Biologists study how the body works. Neurologists examine what goes on inside the brain. Psychologists study what goes on inside the mind to create human behavior. These disciplines focus almost exclusively on structures and processes that reside *within* the individual. In contrast, sociologists study what goes on *among* people as individuals, groups, or societies. How do social forces affect the way people interact with one another? How do individuals make sense of their private lives and the social worlds they occupy? How does everyday social interaction create "society"?

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

- A 14-year-old girl, fearing she is overweight, begins systematically starving herself in the hope of becoming more attractive.

- A 55-year-old stockbroker, unable to find work since his firm laid him off, sinks into a depression after losing his family and his home. He now lives on the streets.

- The student body president and valedictorian of the local high school cannot begin or end her day without several shots of whiskey.

What do these people have in common? Your first response might be that they all have terrible personal problems that have made their lives suck. If you saw them only for what they've become—the "anorexic," the "homeless person," or the "alcoholic"—you might think they have some kind of personality defect, genetic flaw, or mental problem that renders them incapable of coping with the demands of contemporary life. Maybe they simply lack the willpower to pick themselves up and move on. In short, your immediate tendency may be to focus on the unique, perhaps "abnormal," characteristics of these people to explain their problems.

But we cannot downplay the importance of their *social* worlds. There is no denying that we live in a society that exalts lean bodies, values individual achievement and economic success, and encourages drinking to excess. Some people suffer under these conditions when they don't measure up. This is not to say that all people exposed to the same

social messages inevitably fall victim to the same problems. Some overcome their wretched childhoods, others withstand the tragedy of economic failure and begin anew, and some are immune to narrowly defined cultural images of beauty. But to understand fully the nature of human life or of particular social problems, we must acknowledge the broader social context in which these things occur.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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

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

Getting fired, for example, is a terrible, even traumatic, private experience. Feelings of personal failure are inevitable when one loses a job. But would your feelings of failure differ if you lived in Ames, Iowa—where the typical unemployment rate is just over 1%—versus El Centro, California—where the rate is 17% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019c)? If yes, then we must see unemployment not as a personal malfunction but as a social problem that has its roots in the economic and political structures of society. Listen to how one columnist described his job loss:

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

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

The same can be said for divorce, which people usually experience as an intimate tragedy. But in the United States, it's estimated that 4 out of every 10 marriages that begin this year will eventually end in divorce. And divorce rates are increasing dramatically in many countries around the world. We must therefore view divorce in the context of broader historical changes occurring throughout societies: in family, law, religion, economics, and the culture as a whole. It is impossible to explain significant changes in divorce rates over time by focusing exclusively on the personal characteristics and behaviors of divorcing individuals. Divorce rates don't rise simply because individual spouses have more difficulty getting along with one another than they used to, and they don't fall because more spouses are suddenly being nicer to each other.

Mills did not mean to imply that the sociological imagination should debilitate us—that is, force us to powerlessly perceive our lives as wholly beyond our control. In fact, the opposite is true. An awareness of the impact of social forces or

world history on our personal lives is a prerequisite to any efforts we make to change our social circumstances.

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

CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, understanding our place within cultural, historical, and global contexts is more important than ever. The world is shrinking. Communication technology binds us to people on the other side of the planet. Increasing ecological awareness opens our eyes to the far-reaching effects of environmental degradations. The changes associated with colossal events in one country (political revolutions, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, economic crises, school shootings, cultural upheavals) often quickly reverberate around the world. The local and global consequences of such events often continue to be felt for years.

When we look at how people's lives are altered by such phenomena—as they sink into poverty or ascend to prosperity, stand in bread lines or enter a career previously unavailable, or find their sense of ethnic identity, personal safety, or self-worth altered—we can begin to understand the everyday importance of large-scale social change.

However, we must remember that individuals are not just helpless pawns of societal forces. They simultaneously influence and are influenced by society. We live in a world in which our everyday lives are largely a product of structural, or **macrolevel**, societal and historical processes. Society is an objective fact that coerces, even creates us (P. L. Berger, 1963). At the same time, we constantly create, maintain, reaffirm, and transform society. Hence, society is part and parcel of individual-level human interaction, what sociologists call **microlevel** everyday phenomena (R. Collins, 1981). But although we create society, we then collectively forget we've done so, believe it exists independently of us, and live our lives under its influence.

The next chapter provides a more detailed treatment of this theme. Then, in Part II, I examine how society and our social lives are constructed and ordered. I focus on the interplay between individuals and the people, groups, organizations, institutions, and culture that collectively make up our society. Part III focuses on the structure of society, with particular attention to the various forms of social inequality.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- The primary theme of sociology is that our everyday thoughts and actions are the product of a complex interplay between massive social forces and personal characteristics. We can't understand the relationship between individuals and societies without understanding both.

- The sociological imagination is the ability to see the impact of social forces on our private lives—an awareness that our lives lie at the intersection of personal biography and societal history.

- Rather than studying what goes on within people, sociologists study what goes on between people, whether as individuals, groups, organizations, or entire societies. Sociology forces us to look outside the tight confines of our individual personalities to understand the phenomena that shape us.

KEY TERMS

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

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

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

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

sociology: The systematic study of human societies