THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

What is the relationship between your private life and the social world around you? Part I introduces you to the guiding theme of this book: Our personal, everyday experiences affect and are affected by the larger society in which we live. In Chapters 1 and 2 I discuss the sociological perspective on human life and the ways in which it differs from the more individualistic approaches of psychology and biology. You will read about what society consists of and get a glimpse into sociologists' attempts to understand the two-way relationship between the individual and society.

As you read on, keep in mind a metaphor that will be used throughout the book to help explain the nature of society: architecture. Like buildings, societies have a design and form discernible to the alert eye. Both are constructed by bringing together a wide variety of materials in a complex process. Both, through their structure, shape the activities within. At the same time, both change. Sometimes they shift subtly and gradually as the inhabitants go about their lives; other times they are deliberately redecorated or remodeled. As you make your way through this book, see if you can discover more ways in which buildings and societies are alike.

1 TAKING A NEW LOOK AT A FAMILIAR WORLD

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1.1 Describe the relationships between individuals and society

1.2 Explain how the sociological imagination enhances our perspective of everyday life

André graduated from college in June 2020 about 3 months into the coronavirus pandemic, the worst global public health crisis in a century. He had always been a model student. Prior to the pandemic, he found time to help kids read at the local elementary school and actively participated in student government at his university. 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 Wall Street 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 the jobs he'd seen advertised, 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 driving at night for Uber. 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 which one of his flaws had soured his relationship with Grace; his friends question Grace's psychological stability. Such reactions are not uncommon. We have a marked tendency to rely on an **individualistic explanation**, attributing people's achievements and disappointments to their personal qualities.

So why can't André, our highly capable, well-trained college graduate, find a permanent job? It's certainly possible that he has some personal weakness 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 and economic factors that may have affected André's job prospects. Many economists originally projected the 2020 job market to be the best for college graduates in the past half century; it turned out to be the worst since the Great Recession of 2008. But COVID-19 was not the whole story. Even before the pandemic, rates of unemployment and underemployment for college graduates were higher than they were two decades earlier. In addition, during that same time span, wages for recent college graduates did not increase (Braven, 2021). So, in many ways, André's employment opportunities were being determined well before the pandemic hit.

COVID-19 did, however, make a bad situation much worse. At the beginning of the pandemic 22 million jobs disappeared virtually overnight. Even when the economy began to recover 6 months later there were still 1.5 million fewer jobs than there were prior to the pandemic. Although the overall unemployment rates did improve—6% in April 2021 (or 9.7 million people) compared to 14.7% in April 2020—high-paying opportunities remained scarce. Incidentally, the official unemployment rate only counts people who have been actively seeking employment for the past month. Thus, it doesn't include the 5.8 million people who were employed part time even though they wanted to work full time, the 1.9 million "marginally attached" unemployed people who had looked for a job sometime in the past year (just not in the past month), and the 523,000 "discouraged" workers who had lost hope and given up looking for employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

But André has a college education. That should help, right? Well, that has turned out not to be the case. The unemployment rate for recent college graduates is actually no different from the rate for workers overall, and at times it's been even higher. This suggests that a college degree—once believed to be the golden ticket to a solid career—wasn't providing the sort of employment advantage it used to (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2021). Indeed, in the first 3 months of the pandemic, the number of postings for entry-level jobs typically filled by college

graduates fell by 73%. As one economist put it, "While hiring…slowed in every major industry and state …, the prospects [were] particularly bleak for new college graduates hoping to start their careers" (as quoted in Pinsker, 2020, p. 1).

To add salt to the wound, some college seniors who had received post-graduation job offers prior to the pandemic saw those offers withdrawn when the pandemic hit. A July 2020 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2020) found that 7.8% of employers had revoked (or planned to revoke) job offers to the class of 2020. For those who were lucky enough not to have their job offers rescinded, about one-third had their starting dates significantly delayed, on average between 1 and 3 months. And because COVID-19 hit in the late spring, graduate school application cycles had already ended, making it hard for bachelor's degree recipients with no employment prospects to stay in the education system longer (Pinsker, 2020).

And as if all this wasn't bad enough, college graduates are currently saddled with unprecedented levels of student debt. Nearly 45 million Americans have student loan debt to the tune of $1.7 trillion. Those who graduated in the past few years carry an average debt of $30,000. In fact, Americans owe $739 billion *more* in student loan debt than total U.S. credit card debt (Student Loan Hero, 2021). As a consequence, one recent survey found that 35% of college graduates now consider themselves working or lower class, compared to only 20% in 1983. Over that same period of time, the percentage of graduates who consider themselves middle or upper class has dropped from 80% to 64% (Boak & Swanson, 2019).

So you see, André's employability in his chosen field and his chances of earning a good living were as much a result of the social, economic, and global health forces operating at the time he began looking for a job as of any of his personal qualifications. Had he graduated 2 or 3 years earlier—when employment opportunities were relatively plentiful—his prospects would have been much brighter. In fact, even if he graduated *one year later*, as the economy was in the midst of a dramatic recovery and some businesses were struggling to find enough people to fill their job openings, he would have faced fewer obstacles to his employment.

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, co-workers, 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 et al., 1990). Research shows that the risk of a relationship ending increases as the supply of potential alternative relationships increases (South & Lloyd, 1995).

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 (Parker et al., 2014). For a single, straight 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, COVID-19 vaccine status) more or less attractive. And broad economic forces can affect intimate choices even further. In China, where there are about 41 million more unmarried young men than women (Tsai, 2012a), single women can be especially choosy when it comes to romantic partners, often requiring that suitors be employed and own a home 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. But it doesn't take a once-in-a-lifetime social event like a deadly global pandemic to determine the trajectory of our everyday lives. All sorts of external features that are beyond our immediate awareness and control exert an influence on the circumstances of our day-to-day lives. 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 (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, 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 occupied by men, whereas others, such as registered nurse and preschool teacher, are almost exclusively filled by women. Likewise, the doctrines of your religion may limit your behavioral choices. For a devout Catholic, premarital sex or even divorce is unlikely. Each day during the holy month of Ramadan, a strict Muslim must abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. An Orthodox Jew would never dream of drinking milk and eating meat at the same meal. Even universal bodily needs can be influenced by our social context.

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION
A SOCIOLOGY OF SLEEP

Everybody sleeps. At certain moments in our lives—when we've pulled an all-nighter studying for finals, when we're congested and feverish, when we become new parents—sleep may be the most all-encompassing preoccupation we have. Indeed, one of the major ailments of modern life is lack of sleep. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018), 32% of American adults don't get enough sleep, a figure that rises to

72% among teenagers. In the United States alone, there are over 2,000 sleep clinics to treat people's sleep problems. "Fatigue management" is now a growing therapeutic field (as cited in Kolbert, 2013).

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

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

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

Yet the boundary between work (wakefulness) and home (sleep) is not always so clear. In certain occupations that involve the operation of heavy machinery—such as long-distance truckers, train conductors, and airplane pilots—tired workers pose obvious safety hazards. Hence, they have mandatory downtime policies and work-hour limitations. But as the pace of life has sped up, even office-based, nonmanual occupations are facing the problem of worker exhaustion due to lack of sleep. It's estimated that fatigue costs the U.S. economy $18 billion each year in higher stress and lost productivity (Pasupathy & Barker, 2012). One-third of respondents in one poll indicated that they'd fallen asleep at work in the previous month (National Sleep Foundation, 2008).

Some sociologists have argued that recent changes in the workplace—flexible schedules, telecommuting, home-based work—have begun to blur the time-honored boundaries between public and private, work and home, and given rise to shifting conceptions of sleep. More and more companies have come to the conclusion that restorative naps are a relatively cheap solution to the problem of excessive drowsiness. Many now provide nap rooms (or serenity rooms) for their employees, where they can find comfortable sofas, soothing lighting, and enforced bans on tablet and smartphone usage.

We're not yet to the point where *all* American employees have opportunities to take periodic power naps at work. We're not in danger of becoming a *siesta* culture where midday napping is encouraged anytime soon. However, I hope you can now see that "the very places, spaces [and] schedules … of sleep are themselves deeply social, cultural, historical, and political matters—and potentially subject to contestation and change" (Williams, 2011a, p. 31). Even in something so natural as sleep, society interacts with the individual to shape the experience.

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

National and international economic trends also affect your everyday life. You may lose your job or, like André, face a tight job market as a result of economic fluctuations exacerbated by 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, more adults in this age group live with their parents than live 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 (as 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 make it more difficult for you to vote. Workplace family leave policies or health insurance regulations established by the government may affect your decision whether and when to have a baby or to undergo the elective surgery you've been putting off. If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, the federal and state governments can determine whether you can be fired from your job simply because of your sexual or gender identity. In the United States, decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court can increase or limit your ability to control your fertility, vote, sue an employer for discrimination, use your property however you please, carry a concealed weapon

in public, legally marry, become a citizen if you were born elsewhere, 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 the fall of 2014, an outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in several West African countries grabbed the world's attention. There were more than 20,000 documented cases in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone and about 8,000 deaths. But even though the risk of contracting this disease in the United States was exceedingly low—there were four documented cases and one death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015b)—one-fifth of Americans worried about getting it (Gallup, 2014). Immediately following the outbreak in West Africa, the Department of Homeland Security implemented restrictions on travel to these countries and imposed elevated screening for passengers arriving from them. Anxieties grew. A train station in Dallas was shut down when a passenger was reported to have vomited on the platform. A cruise ship was blocked from docking in Mexico because a passenger worked in the Texas hospital where an Ebola patient had died. Schools were shut down when it was suspected that an employee might have been on the same plane as an Ebola patient. Experts feared that the entire international business travel industry could suffer huge financial losses (Sharkey, 2014).

- 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 in the United States.

- When Mount Agung on the island of Bali erupted in 2017, international flights were cancelled or diverted, resulting in significant economic losses for airlines worldwide.

- In 2021, a massive container ship, the Ever Given, became lodged sideways in the Suez Canal, the busiest trade route in the world. For days, it brought global markets, most notably crude oil, to a standstill. As a result, oil prices jumped in the United States.

- And, of course, the global coronavirus pandemic began in China but soon reached every corner of the globe, disrupting national economies, killing millions of people, and instantly altering the life rhythm of just about every person on earth.

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

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 experiences, such as love, sexuality, poverty, aging, and prejudice, are better understood when examined 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 (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 would now be considered unhoused.

- The student body president and valedictorian of the local high school cannot begin or end their 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 typically 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 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 Logan, Utah—where the unemployment rate is 2.6%—versus El Centro, California—where the rate is 16% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021)? 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 during the Great Recession of 2008:

> 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 (Mills, 1959). Drug addiction, homelessness, sexual violence, hate crimes, eating disorders, suicide, and other unfortunate situations will not go away simply by treating or punishing a person who is suffering from or engaging in the behavior. Several years ago, a tragic event occurred at the university where I taught at the time. On a pleasant May night at the beginning of final exam week, a first-year student killed himself. The incident sent shock waves through this small, close-knit campus.

As you would expect in such a situation, the question on everyone's mind was "Why did he do it?" Although no definitive answer could ever be obtained, most people simply concluded that it was a "typical" suicide. They assumed that he must have been despondent, hopeless, unhappy, and unable to cope with the demands of college life. Some students said they heard he was failing some of his courses. Others said they heard he didn't get into the fraternity he wanted or that he was a bit of a loner. In other words, something was wrong with *him*.

As heartbreaking as this incident was, it was far from unique. Between 1950 and 2018, the U.S. suicide rate more than tripled for people between the ages of 15 and 24, making it the second leading cause of death in this age group (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019). And just since 1980, the suicide rate for 5- to 14-year-olds has quadrupled and is now the third leading cause of death among school age children. In 2019, 19% of U.S. high school students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the previous year (Ivey-Stephenson et al., 2020).

Focusing on individual feelings, such as depression, hopelessness, and frustration, doesn't tell us why so many people in this age group commit suicide, nor does it tell us why rates of youth suicide increase—or for that matter decrease—from decade to decade. So to understand why the student at my university made such a choice, we must look beyond his private mental state and examine the social and historical factors that may have affected him.

Clearly, life in contemporary developed societies is focused on individual accomplishment—being well dressed, popular, and successful—more strongly than ever before. Young people face almost constant pressure to "measure up" and define their identities, and therefore their self-worth, according to standards set by others (Mannon, 1997). Although most adjust pretty well, others can't. In addition, as competition for scarce financial resources becomes more acute, young people are likely to experience heightened levels of stress and confusion about their own futures. To some, expectations regarding educational success have spun out of control, resulting in a national school-related stress epidemic. As one teacher put it, "We are sitting on a ticking time bomb" (as quoted in Abeles, 2016, p. 2). When the quest for success begins earlier and earlier, the costs of not succeeding increase. Media depictions of youthful angst can exacerbate the problem. For instance, a recent study found that in the month following the 2017

release of the Netflix show *13 Reasons Why*, there was a 29% increase in suicide rates among 10- to 17-year-olds (Bridge et al., 2019).

Growing educational expectations may explain why suicides among young men of color (ages 15–24), once quite rare and still relatively less frequent than suicides among white people, increased dramatically in the past two decades (see Exhibit 1.1). Some experts have blamed these trends on a growing sense of hopelessness and a long-standing cultural taboo against discussing mental health matters. Others, however, have cited broader social factors, brought about, ironically, by the growing economy of the late 20th century and the more recent recovery from the 2008 recession. As more and more families of color move into the middle class, they feel increasing pressure to compete in traditionally white-dominated professions and social environments.

EXHIBIT 1.1 ■ How Do Race and Gender Affect Young People's Desire to Commit Suicide?
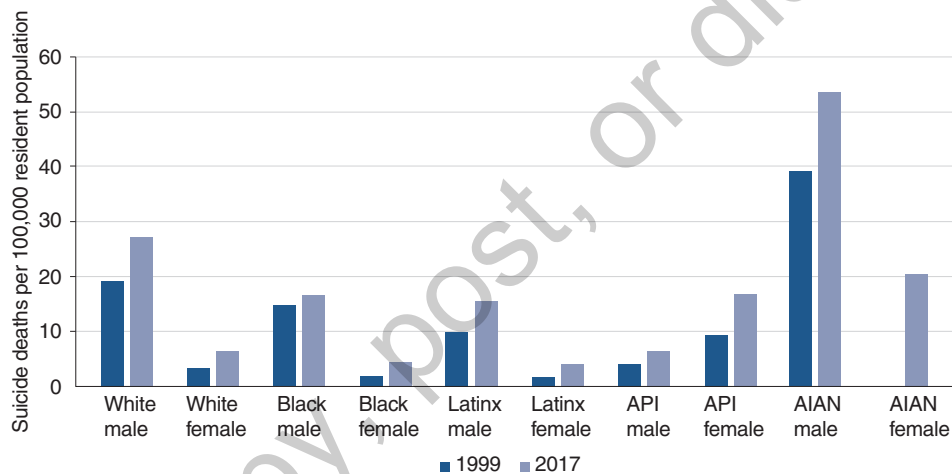
Source: Curtin and Hedeggard (2019).

API = Asian and Pacific Islander; AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native.

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

In other societies, different types of social changes may account for fluctuations in suicide rates. For instance, South Korea has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world (27 per 100,000; World Population Review, 2019), nearly 80% greater than that of the United States. South Korea has achieved phenomenal growth since World War II, transforming from a poor rural country to one of the world's most thriving economies. But with economic success comes economic pressure. Twenty years ago, South Korea experienced a major financial crash. Since then, fear of another crash has intensified workplace stress. According to the South Korean Health and Welfare Ministry, 90% of South Koreans who commit suicide suffer from stress-related conditions. In addition, South Korea's highly competitive educational system creates

heightened anxiety for young people. The suicide rate for South Koreans between the ages of 10 and 19 is the highest in the world. As one author put it, "South Korea's work and school cultures are lethally toxic" (Singh, 2017, p. 1).

Émile Durkheim: Not All Suicides Are Created Equal

Sociologists' interest in linking suicide to certain processes going on in society is not new. In one of the classic pieces of social research, the famous sociologist Émile Durkheim (1897/1951) argued that suicide is more likely to occur under particular social circumstances and in particular communities. He was the first to see suicide as a manifestation of changes in society rather than of psychological shortcomings.

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

For about 7 years, Durkheim carefully examined the available data on suicide rates among various social groups in Europe—from different regions of countries, certain religious or ethnic groups, and so on—looking for important social patterns. If suicides were purely acts of individual desperation, he reasoned, one would not expect to find any noticeable changes in the rates from year to year or from society to society. That is, the distribution of desperate, unstable, unhappy individuals should be roughly equal across time and culture. If, however, certain groups or societies had a consistently higher rate of suicide than others, something more than individual disposition would seem to be at work.

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

Another type, what he called **anomic suicide**, occurs when people's lives are suddenly disrupted by major social events, such as economic depressions, wars, and famines. At these times, he argued, the conditions around which people have organized their lives are dramatically altered, leaving them with a sense of hopelessness and despair as they come to realize they can no longer live the life to which they were accustomed. For instance, anxiety about job insecurity acts as a chronic stressor that can increase the likelihood of suicide (Ng et al., 2013). A study of suicide trends over the past 80 years found that overall rates tend to rise during economic recessions and fall during economic expansions (Luo et al., 2011). Many experts attribute the 28% increase in suicides among U.S. adults between the ages of 35 and 64 in the early 2010s to the economic recession of 2008 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Similarly, the financial crisis that gripped Europe in the mid-2010s led to a spike in suicide rates in the hardest-hit countries, such as Greece, Ireland, and Italy. The problem became so pronounced

that European psychiatrists started calling it "suicide by economic crisis" (Reeves et al., 2014). And although we have yet to experience a marked increase in suicides as a result of COVID-19, previous pandemics (the Spanish Flu in 1918, SARS in 2003, and Ebola in 2013) all led to spikes in suicides in the hardest hit regions of the world (Liang & Nestadt, 2021).

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

Durkheim also discovered that suicide rates in all the countries he examined tended to be consistently higher among widowed, single, and divorced people than among married people; higher among people without children than among parents; and higher among Protestants than among Catholics. Did this mean that unmarried people, childless people, and Protestants were more unhappy, depressed, or psychologically dysfunctional than other people? Durkheim didn't think so. Instead, he felt that something about the nature of social life among people in these groups increased the likelihood of what he called **egoistic suicide**.

Durkheim reasoned that when group, family, or community ties are weak or de-emphasized, people feel disconnected and alone. He pointed out, for instance, that the Catholic Church emphasizes salvation through community and binds its members to the church through elaborate doctrine and ritual; Protestantism, in contrast, emphasizes individual salvation and responsibility. This religious individualism, he believed, explained the differences he noticed in suicide rates between Catholics and Protestants. Self-reliance and independence may glorify one in God's eyes, but they become liabilities if one is in the throes of personal tragedy.

Durkheim feared that life in modern society tends to be individualistic and dangerously alienating. More than a century later, contemporary sociologists have found evidence supporting Durkheim's insight (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Riesman, 1950). Many people in the United States today don't know and have no desire to know their neighbors. Strangers are treated with suspicion. In the pursuit of economic opportunities, we have become more willing to relocate, sometimes to regions far from family and existing friends and colleagues—the very people who could and would offer support in times of need.

The structure of our communities discourages the formation of bonds with others, and, not surprisingly, the likelihood of suicide increases at the same time. In the United States today, the highest suicide rates can be found in sparsely populated states, such as Alaska, New Mexico, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019e). Exhibits 1.2 and 1.3 show this pattern. These states tend to have a larger proportion of new residents who are not part of an established community. People tend to be more isolated, less likely to seek help or comfort from others in times of trouble, and therefore more susceptible to suicide than people

who live in more populous states. It's worth noting that sparsely populated rural areas also have higher rates of gun ownership than other areas of the United States. More than half of the rural youths who kill themselves do so with a firearm. Indeed, gun suicides in general are three times more common in rural areas than in urban areas (Beck, 2015b).

| EXHIBIT 1.2 ■ The More Crowded the State, the Lower the Suicide Rate		
State	**Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population**	**Persons per Square Mile**
United States	14.2	93.3
Alabama	16.3	97.2
Alaska	28.5	1.3
Arizona	18.7	65.3
Arkansas	18	58.2
California	10.7	252.7
Colorado	22.1	56.0
Connecticut	11.4	734.5
Delaware	11.3	506.4
Florida	14.5	405.3
Georgia	14.6	186.2
Hawaii	15.5	219.1
Idaho	20.4	22.1
Illinois	10.9	226.7
Indiana	14.2	188.5
Iowa	16.7	56.6
Kansas	18.2	35.6
Kentucky	16.5	113.4
Louisiana	15	107.5
Maine	19.4	43.8
Maryland	10.3	623.8
Massachusetts	8.7	883.8
Michigan	14.3	176.3
Minnesota	14.4	71
Mississippi	14.4	63.2

(*Continued*)

EXHIBIT 1.2 ■ The More Crowded the State, the Lower the Suicide Rate (*Continued*)		
State	**Suicide Rate per 100,000 Resident Population**	**Persons per Square Mile**
Missouri	18.2	89.5
Montana	26.2	7.4
Nebraska	16.1	25.2
Nevada	19.8	28.6
New Hampshire	17.5	152.6
New Jersey	8	1,207.8
New Mexico	24	17.4
New York	8.3	410.3
North Carolina	12.5	218.0
North Dakota	18.1	11.1
Ohio	15.1	286.2
Oklahoma	20.5	58
Oregon	20.4	44.2
Pennsylvania	14.1	285.7
Rhode Island	10.7	1,022.6
South Carolina	16.2	173.6
South Dakota	20.9	11.8
Tennessee	17.2	167
Texas	13.4	112.4
Utah	21.2	39.6
Vermont	166	67.6
Virginia	12.8	217.5
Washington	15.9	115.8
West Virginia	18.5	74.2
Wisconsin	14	107.7
Wyoming	29.3	6.0

Sources: National Center for Health Statistics (2021); ProQuest Statistical Abstract (2021, Table 16).

EXHIBIT 1.3 ■   What States Have the Highest and Lowest Suicide Rates?
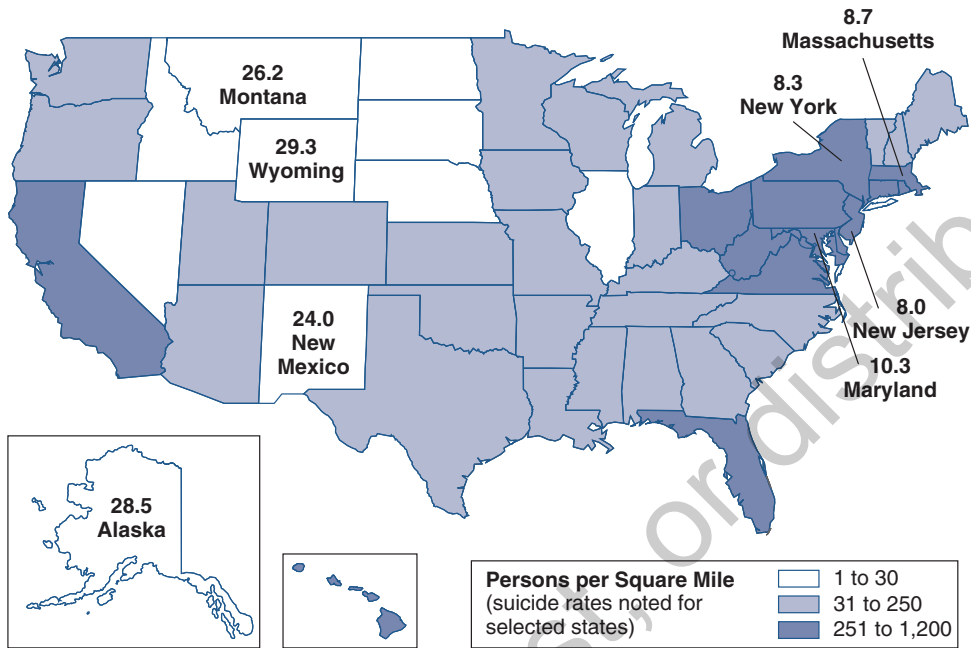
Sources: National Center for Health Statistics (2021); ProQuest Statistical Abstract (2021, Table 16).

    Durkheim also felt, however, that another type of suicide (what he called **altruistic suicide**) is more likely when the ties to one's community are too strong instead of too weak. He suggested that in certain societies, individuality is completely overshadowed by one's group membership; the individual literally lives for the group, and personality is merely a reflection of the collective identity of the community. In some cases, commitment to a particular political cause can be powerful enough to lead some people to take their own lives. In India, the number of politically motivated suicides doubled between 2006 and 2008. For example, a few years ago 200 people took their own lives in support of efforts to establish a separate state, Telangana, in southern India (Polgreen, 2010). Spiritual loyalty can also lead to altruistic suicide. Some religious sects require their members to reject their ties to outside people and groups and to live by the values and customs of their new community. When members feel that they can no longer contribute to the group and sustain their value within it, they may take their own lives out of loyalty to cultural expectations.

    Just as suicide in these settings is tied to the social system of which people are a part, so, too, was the suicide of the young college student at my university. His choices and life circumstances were also a function of the values and conditions of his particular society. No doubt he had serious emotional problems, but these problems may have been part and parcel of his social circumstances. Had he lived in a society that didn't place as much pressure on young people or glorify individual achievement, he might not have chosen suicide. That's what the sociological imagination helps us understand.

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, deadly virus outbreaks, 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 (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 (Collins, 1981). But although we create society, we then collectively forget we've done so, believe it exists independently of us, and live our lives under its influence. The Micro-Macro Connections found throughout this book will help you see this interrelationship between macrolevel societal forces and many of the microlevel experiences we have as individuals.

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

YOUR TURN

The sociological imagination serves as the driving theme throughout this book. It's not a particularly difficult concept to grasp in the abstract: Things that are largely outside our control affect our everyday lives in ways that are sometimes not immediately apparent; our personal biographies are a function, at least in part, of broader historical circumstances. Yet what does this actually mean? Is it possible to see the impact of larger social and historical events on your own life? One way is to find out what occurrences were happening at the time of your birth. Go to the library—or an online archive—and find a newspaper and a popular magazine that were published on the day you were born. It would be especially useful to find a newspaper from the town or city in which you were born. What major news events took place that day? What were the dominant social and political concerns at the time? What was the state of the economy?

What was considered fashionable in clothing, music, movies, and so forth? Ask your parents or other adults about their reactions to these events and conditions.

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

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

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

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

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

KEY TERMS

altruistic suicide (p. 18)

anomic suicide (p. 14)

comparative method (p. 14)

egoistic suicide (p. 15)

fatalistic suicide (p. 14)

individualistic explanation (p. 3)

macrolevel (p. 19)

microlevel (p. 19)

sociological imagination (p. 11)

sociology (p. 6)