

UNDERSTANDING OUR SOCIAL WORLD

PART

I

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SOCIOLOGY

A Unique Way to View the World

MICRO

- **ME (MY FAMILY AND CLOSE FRIENDS)**
- **LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITY**
My school, place of worship, hangouts

MESO

- **NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, INSTITUTIONS, AND ETHNIC SUBCULTURES**
My political party, ethnic affiliation

MACRO

- **SOCIETY**
Type of national government and economic system
- **GLOBAL COMMUNITY**
United Nations, World Bank, Doctors Without Borders, multinational corporations

WHAT WILL YOU LEARN IN THIS CHAPTER?

This chapter will help you to do the following:

- 1.1 Explain the sociological perspective
- 1.2 Describe why sociology can be useful for us
- 1.3 Show how the social world model works, with examples

This model illustrates a core idea carried throughout the book—how your own life is shaped by your family, community, society, and world, and how you influence them in return. Understanding this model can help you to better understand your social world and to make a positive impact on it.

Think About It

| | |
|--|---|
| Micro: Local communities | How can sociology help me understand my own life in the context of my social world? |
| Meso: National institutions, complex organizations, and ethnic groups | How do sociologists help us understand and even improve our lives in school, work, and health care organizations? |
| Macro: National and global systems | How might national and global events affect my life? |

Can an individual make a difference in the world or in a community? How does your family influence your chances of gaining a college degree and a high-paying job? If you were born into a poor family, what are your chances of becoming wealthy? How does your level of education impact your likelihood of marrying—and staying married? Why are Generation Zers less likely to have sex than Generation Xers? How can sociology help you understand and be an effective member of society?

These are some of the questions a deeper understanding of our social world can help you answer. Sociology gives us new perspectives on our personal and professional lives and sociological insights and skills that can help make the world a better place. Sociology can change your life—and help you change the world.



Covid-19 showed us how deeply embedded our social relationships—and the norms surrounding them—truly are.

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Sometimes, it takes a dramatic and shocking event for us to realize just how deeply embedded we are in our social relationships in the social world that we take for granted.

The Covid-19 pandemic was one such occurrence. The new norms it required us to follow violated the rules that support our connections to one another. In fact, it was imperative that we physically distance ourselves from one another and actively avoid social interactions.

Most of the time, we live with social patterns that we take for granted as routine, ordinary, and expected. These social patterns help us understand what is happening and know what to expect. Unlike our innate drives, social expectations come from those around us and guide (or constrain) our behaviors and thoughts. Without shared expectations among humans about proper patterns of behavior, life would be chaotic. Our social interactions require some basic rules, and these rules create routine and normalcy. It is strange if someone breaks the expected patterns. As society changes, however, so do our social patterns. Imagine how you used to react to people wearing face masks. What was once strange behavior became normalized after the pandemic hit.

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

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

1.1 Explain the sociological perspective.

Sociology is the scientific study of social life, social change, and social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists examine how society both shapes and is shaped by individuals, small groups of people, organizations, national societies, and global social networks. For you, this means learning how what you do affects other people and groups—and how they affect your life.

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

Two-person interactions—*dyads*—are the smallest units studied by sociologists. Examples of dyads include roommates discussing their classes, a professor and student going over an assignment, a husband and wife negotiating their budget, and two children playing. Next in size are small groups consisting of three or more interacting people who know each other—a family, a neighborhood or peer group, a classroom, a work group, or a street gang. Then come increasingly larger groups—organizations such as sports or scouting clubs, neighborhood associations, and local religious congregations. Among the largest groups contained within nations are ethnic groups and national organizations or institutions, such as Google and Facebook, the Republican and Democratic national political parties,



Here, children experience ordered interaction in the competitive environment of a soccer game. What values, skills, attitudes, and assumptions about life and social interaction do you think these young kids are learning?

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and national religious organizations, such as the Southern Baptists. Nations themselves are still larger and can sometimes involve hundreds of millions of people. In the past several decades, social scientists have increasingly focused on **globalization**, *the process by which the entire world is becoming a single interdependent entity*. Of particular interest to sociologists is how these various groups are organized, how they function, how they influence one another, and why they can come into conflict.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

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

Ideas Underlying Sociology

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

People are social by nature

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

People live much of their lives belonging to social groups

It is in social groups that we interact with family, friends, and fellow workers; learn to share goals and to cooperate with others in our groups; develop identities that are influenced by our group affiliations; obtain power over others (or are relatively powerless); and have conflicts with others over resources we all want. Our individual beliefs and behaviors, our experiences, our observations, and the problems we face are derived from connections to our social groups.

Interaction between the individual and the group is a two-way process in which each influences the other

In our family or on a sports team, we can influence the shape and direction of our group, just as the group provides the rules and decides the expected behaviors for individuals.

Recurrent social patterns, ordered behavior, shared expectations, and common understandings among people characterize groups

Normally, a degree of continuity and recurrent behavior is present in human interactions, whether in small groups, large organizations, or society. We can distinguish groups from one another based on their social patterns.

The processes of conflict and change are natural and inevitable features of groups and societies

No group can remain unchanged and hope to perpetuate itself. To survive, groups must adapt to changes in the social and physical environment; yet rapid change often comes at a price. It can lead to conflict within a society—between traditional and new ideas and between groups that have vested interests in particular ways of doing things. For example, both the marriage equality and the Black Lives Matter movements have prompted change and garnered backlash from those opposed to those changes.

You will find the previous ideas underlying sociology relevant in each of the topics we discuss. As you read this book, keep in mind these basic ideas that form the foundation of sociological analysis: People are social, they live and carry out activities largely in groups, interaction influences both individual and group behavior, people share common behavior patterns and expectations, and processes such as change and conflict are always present. These sociological understandings will provide you with a sociological eye. With it, you can see what many others miss in our social world.

Sociological Findings and Commonsense Beliefs

Through research, sociologists have shown that many commonly held beliefs—“commonsense”—are not actually true. Here are three examples.

Belief: Most of the differences in the behaviors of women and men are based on “human nature”; men and women are just different from each other

Research shows that biological factors certainly play a part in the behaviors of men and women, but the culture (beliefs, values, rules, and way of life) that people learn as they grow up determines who does what and how biological tendencies are played out. A unique example illustrates this: In the nomadic Wodaabe tribe in Central Africa, women do most of the heavy work, whereas men adorn themselves with makeup, sip tea, and gossip (Drury, 2015; Zaidi, 2017). Each year, the group holds a festival where men adorn makeup and fancy hairstyles and show their white teeth and the whites of their eyes to attract a marriage partner. Variations in the behavior of men and women around the world are so great that it is impossible to attribute behavior to biology or human nature alone.

Belief: Racial groupings are based on biological differences among people

Actually, racial categorizations are socially constructed (created by members of society) and vary among societies and over time within societies. A person can be seen as one race in Brazil and another in the United States. Even within the United States, racial categories have changed many times. All one has to do is look at old U.S. Census records to see how racial categories change over time—even within the same nation! We discuss construction of the concept of race in Chapter 8.



In the early 20th century, immigrants to the United States of Irish and Italian ancestry were not considered “White” in Virginia and several other states. In some cases where parochial schools were not an option, Irish and Italian children were forced to go to racially segregated public schools with Black students.

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Belief: Most marriages in the United States do not last

Marriage and divorce rates differ by age, education level, income, location, and other variables. Those who marry at age 18 or earlier, have less education, and have lower levels of income than the average person have the highest divorce rates (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Those who are middle class or higher tend to have more stable marriages, and most of their marriages do not end in divorce.

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

The Sociological Imagination

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

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

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

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

As you develop your *sociological imagination*, you will notice how social forces shape individual lives and group behavior. Connecting events from the global and national levels to the personal and intimate level of our own lives is the core organizing theme of this book.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

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

Questions Sociologists Ask—and Don't Ask

Think about this—everything a sociologist asks must be answerable through research. Perhaps you have had late-night discussions with your friends about the meaning of life, the existence of God, or the morality of abortion. These are philosophical or religious issues that sociologists, like other scientists, cannot answer through scientific research. What sociologists *do* ask are questions about people in social

groups and organizations—questions that can be studied scientifically. Sociologists may research how people feel about certain issues (the percentage of people who want to ensure that abortions are legal, for example), but sociologists do not determine the right or wrong answers to such value-driven opinions. They are more interested in how people’s beliefs influence their behavior. They focus on issues that can be studied objectively and scientifically—looking for causes or consequences.

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

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

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

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



Binge drinking may be a source of storytelling at a college party but can be offensive at a wedding reception.

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The Social Sciences: A Comparison

Not so long ago, our views of people and social relationships were based solely on stereotypes, intuition, superstitions, supernatural explanations, and traditions passed on from one generation to the next. Natural scientists (e.g., chemists, astronomers, biologists, and oceanographers) were the first to use the

scientific method to understand the world around us, a model later adopted by social scientists. Social scientists, including sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, economists, cultural geographers, historians, and political scientists, apply the scientific method to study social relationships, to correct misleading and harmful misconceptions about human behavior, and to guide policy decisions. Consider the following examples of social science studies.

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



Anthropologists can learn about a society by studying what it throws away. What do you think they would learn about you from your garbage?

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A *psychologist* may wire research subjects to a machine that measures their physiological reaction to a violent film clip and then ask them questions about what they were feeling. *Psychology* is the study of individual behavior and mental processes (e.g., sensation, perception, memory, and thought processes). It differs from sociology in that it focuses on individuals rather than on groups, institutions, and societies. Although there are different branches of psychology, most psychologists are concerned with individual motivations, personality attributes, attitudes, perceptions, abnormal behavior, mental disorders, and the stages of normal human development.

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

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

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

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

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

WHY DOES SOCIOLOGY MATTER?

1.2 Describe why sociology can be useful for us.

Sociology helps you to understand your relationships with other people and whether to support specific social policies. You can also use skills developed through sociology in a wide range of career fields.

Why Study Sociology?

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

This book introduces you to most major topics in sociology, as outlined in *the sociological literacy framework*: the sociological eye (or the sociological imagination); social structure (from micro to macro levels); socialization (the relationship between ourselves and society); stratification (social inequality); and social change and social reproduction (major change processes and how social structures reproduce themselves; American Sociological Association, 2017).

What Can Studying Sociology Help You Do?

When you view our social world with a sociological perspective, you

1. become more self-aware by understanding your social surroundings, which can lead to opportunities to improve your life;
2. have a more complete understanding of social situations by looking beyond individual explanations to include group analyses of behavior;
3. understand and evaluate problems more clearly, viewing the world systematically and objectively rather than only in emotional or personal terms;
4. gain an understanding of the many diverse cultural perspectives and how cultural differences are related to behavioral patterns;
5. assess the impact of social policies;
6. understand the complexities of social life and how to study them scientifically;

7. gain useful skills in interpersonal relations, critical thinking, data collection and analysis, problem-solving, and decision-making; and
8. learn how to change your local environment and the larger society.

Graduates with a bachelor's degree in sociology who seek employment immediately after college are most likely to find their first jobs in social services, administrative assistantships, sales and marketing, or management-related positions. With graduate degrees—a master's or a doctoral degree—sociologists usually become college teachers, researchers, clinicians, or consultants. Some work for governments, whereas others work for businesses or public service nonprofit organizations.

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

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

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

Ask employers what they want in a new hire, and the focus is likely to be on writing, speaking, and analytical skills. Other desired skills include the ability to cope with change; work effectively in diverse teams; gather and interpret quantitative information; and other “soft skills” such as leadership, communication, and collaboration (Beaton, 2017). For example, the top four “soft” (interpersonal) skills employers seek are creativity, collaboration, persuasion, and emotional intelligence. Other relevant abilities include analytical reasoning, business analysis, affiliate (influencer) marketing, and sales (Patel, Griggs & Miller, 2017). These are precisely the skills students gain in sociology courses!

The next section of this chapter shows how the parts of the social world that sociologists study relate to each other, and it outlines the model you will follow as you continue to learn about sociology.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

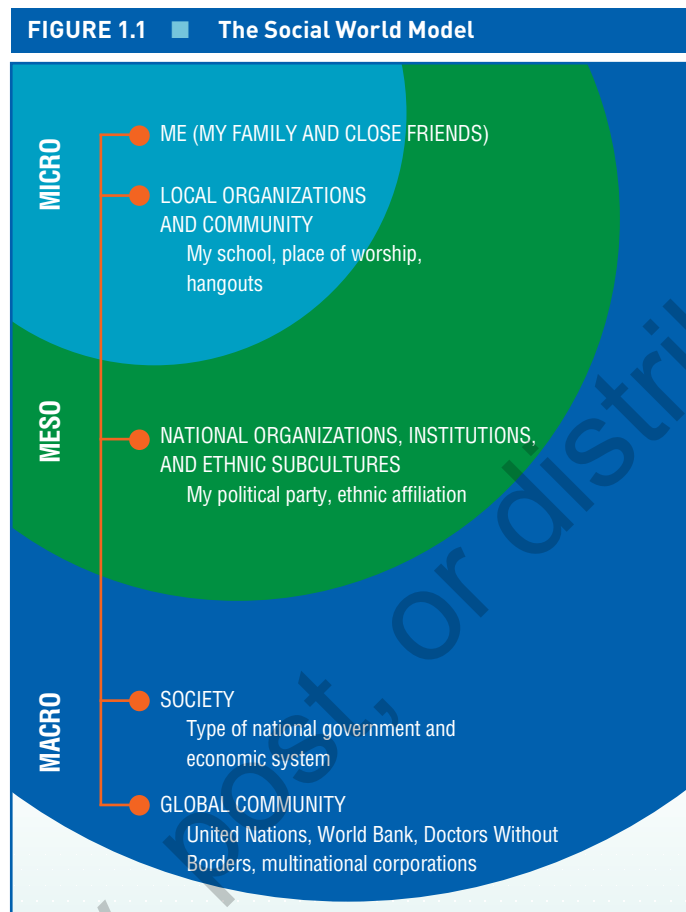
Imagine that you are a mayor, a legislator, a police chief, or another government official. You make decisions based on information gathered by social science research rather than on your own intuition or assumptions. What are some advantages to this decision-making method?

THE SOCIAL WORLD MODEL

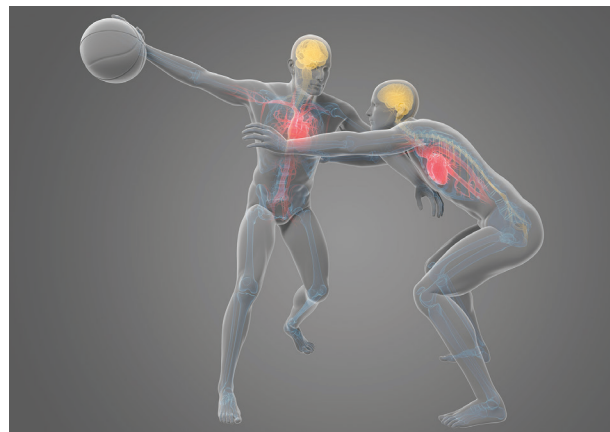
1.3 Show how the social world model works, with examples.

Think about the different groups you depend on and interact with on a daily basis. You wake up to greet members of your family or your roommate. You go to a larger group—a class—that exists within an even larger organization—the college or university. Understanding sociology and the approach of this book requires a grasp of **levels of analysis**—that is, *social groups from the smallest to the largest*.

Groups range from two or more friends, a sports team, or a sorority or fraternity to state governments to global corporations and international organizations. Sociological analysis involves an understanding of these groups and the connections among them.



The **social world model** helps us picture *the levels of analysis in our social surroundings as an interconnected series of small groups, organizations, institutions, and societies*. Sometimes, these groups are connected by mutual support and cooperation, but other times, there are conflicts and power struggles over access to resources. To understand the units or parts of the social world model, look at Figure 1.1 (and at the beginning of each chapter).



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

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

Social Structures

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

All these social units connect to make up the **social structure**—*the stable patterns of interactions, statuses (positions), roles (responsibilities), and organizations that provide stability for the society and bring order to individuals' lives*. Think about these parallels between the structure that holds together the human body and the structure that holds together societies and their units.

Sometimes, however, the units within the social structure are in conflict. For example, a religion that teaches that some forms of birth control are wrong may conflict with the health care system regarding how to provide care to women. This issue has been in the U.S. news, because some religious organizations and religious business owners have fought against the requirements of the Affordable Care Act in the United States that employers provide birth control to those who wish to receive it.

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



This refugee mother and child from Belarus represent the smallest social unit, a dyad. In this case, they are trying to survive with help from larger groups, such as the United Nations.

© Sergei Bobylev/TASS/Newscom

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

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

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

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

Social Processes

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

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

Our Social World and Its Environment

Surrounding each social unit, whether a small family group or a large corporation, is an **environment**—*the setting in which the social unit works, including everything that influences the social unit, such as its physical and organizational surroundings and technological innovations*. Just as each individual has a unique environment with family, friends, and other social groups, each social unit has an environment to which it must adjust. For example, your local church, mosque, or temple may seem autonomous and independent, but it depends on its environment, including its national organization for guidelines and support; the local police force to protect the building from vandalism; and the local economy to

provide jobs to members so that the members, in turn, can support the organization. If the religious education program is going to train children to understand the scriptures, local schools are needed to teach the children to read. A religious group may also be affected by other religious bodies, competing with one another for potential members from the community. These religious groups may work cooperatively—organizing a summer program for children or jointly sponsoring a holy day celebration—or they may define one another as evil, each trying to malign or stigmatize the other. Moreover, one local religious group may be composed primarily of professional and businesspeople and another group mostly of laboring people. The religious groups may experience conflict, in part, because each serves a different socioeconomic constituency in the environment. To understand a social unit or the human body, we must consider the structure and processes within the unit, as well as the interaction with the surrounding environment.

Perfect relationships or complete harmony among the social units is unusual. Social units, be they small groups or large organizations, are often motivated by self-interest and the need for self-preservation, with the result that they compete with other units for resources (e.g., time, money, skills, and the energy of members). Therefore, social units within a society are often in conflict. Whether groups conflict or cooperate, they remain interdependent and can be studied using the scientific method.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

Think of an example of a social unit to which you belong. Describe the environment of the social unit. How does that environment influence that social unit?

Studying the Social World: Levels of Analysis

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

As discussed, each of these social units is referred to as a *level of analysis* (two students in a discussion group, to a society or global system; see Table 1.1). The social world model at the beginning of each chapter illustrates social units, and the examples in the model show their relation to that chapter's content.

Micro-Level Analysis

A **micro-level analysis** focuses on *individual or small-group interaction in specific situations*. One-to-one and small-group interaction form the foundation of all social groups and organizations to which we belong, from families to corporations to societies. We are members of many groups at the micro level.

To understand micro-level analysis, consider the problem of spousal abuse. Why does a person remain in an abusive relationship, knowing that each year thousands of people are killed by their partners and millions more are severely and repeatedly battered? To answer this question, several possible micro-level explanations can be considered. One view is that the abusive partner has convinced the abused person that they are powerless in the relationship or that they “deserve” the abuse. Therefore,

the abused person gives up in despair of ever being able to alter the situation. The abuse is viewed as part of the interaction—of action and reaction—and some partners come to see abuse as what composes normal interaction.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Levels of Analysis and Education

| | Levels | Parts of Education |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Micro-level analysis | Small groups | Sociology class; professor and student interacting; study group cramming for an exam |
| Meso-level analysis | Organizations and institutions | State boards of education; National Education Association |
| Ethnic groups within a nation | Islamic <i>madrassas</i> or Jewish <i>yeshiva</i> school systems | |
| Macro-level analysis | Nations | Policy and laws governing education |
| Global community | World literacy programs | |

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

Another possibility is that an abused person may fear that their children would be harmed or that they would be harshly judged by their family or religious group if they “abandoned” their mate. Or they may not have the resources they need to leave. Studying each of these possible explanations involves analysis at the micro level because each issue posed here focuses on interpersonal interaction factors rather than on large society-wide trends or forces. Moving to the next level, meso-level analysis leads to different explanations for abuse.

Meso-Level Analysis

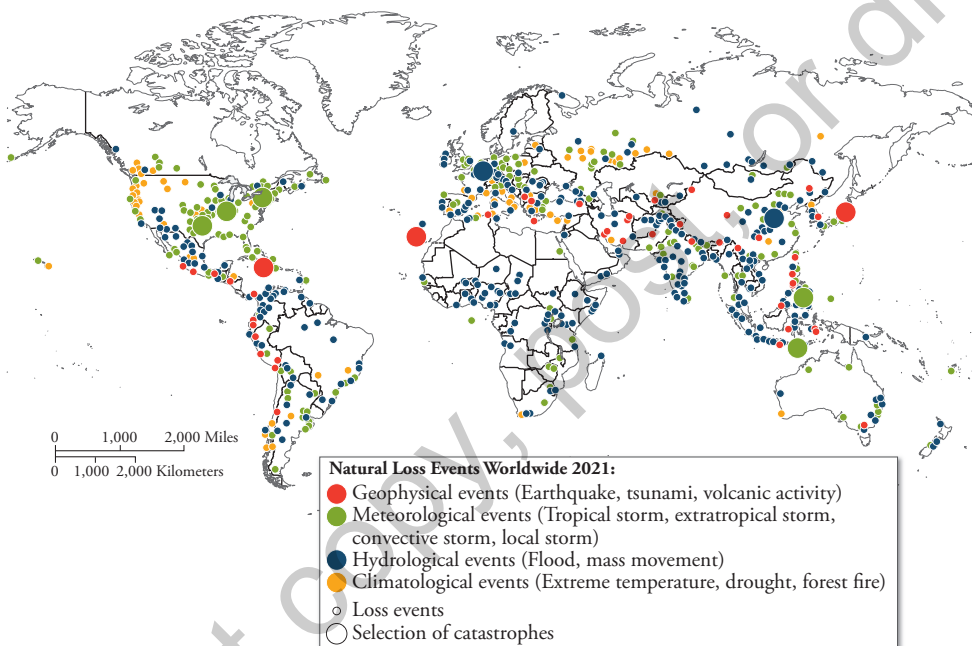
Meso-level analysis involves looking at *intermediate-sized units smaller than the nation but larger than the local community*. This level includes national institutions (such as the economy of a country, the national educational system, or the political system within a country), nationwide organizations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

In discussing micro-level analysis, we used the example of domestic violence. Recognizing that personal troubles can often relate to public issues, many social scientists look for broader explanations of spousal abuse, such as social conditions at the meso level of society (Straus, 2017; Straus et al., 2006). When a pattern of behavior in society occurs with increasing frequency, it cannot be understood solely from the viewpoint of individual cases or micro-level causes. For instance, sociological findings show that fluctuations in spousal or child abuse at the micro level relate to levels of unemployment in meso-level organizations and macro-level government economic policies. Frustration resulting in abuse can erupt within families when poor economic conditions make it nearly impossible for people to find stable and reliable means of supporting themselves and their families. The message here is that we must address meso-level economic issues in society to decrease domestic violence.

Macro-Level Analysis

Studying the largest social units in the social world, called **macro-level analysis**, involves looking at *entire nations*, *global forces (such as international organizations)*, and *international social trends*. Macro-level analysis is essential to our understanding of how larger societal forces and global events shape our everyday lives. A natural disaster, such as recent droughts and floods in North America and West Africa, and massive hurricanes in Central America and the Caribbean, may change the foods we can serve at our family dinner table because much of what we consume comes from other parts of the world. (Figure 1.2 shows some of the deadliest natural disasters in 2020.) Likewise, a political conflict on the other side of the planet can lead to war, which means that a member of your family may be called to active duty and sent into harm's way many thousands of miles from your home. Each member of the family may experience individual stress, have trouble concentrating, and feel ill with worry. The entire globe has become an interdependent social unit. If we are to prosper and thrive in the world today, we need to understand connections that go beyond our local communities. We are, indeed, members of the global community.

FIGURE 1.2 ■ Natural Disasters in 2020



Source: Based on data from "A Running List of Record-Breaking Natural Disasters in 2020," by A. Thompson, December 22, 2020, *Scientific American*.

Distinctions between the levels of analysis are not always sharply delineated. The micro level shades into the meso level, and the lines between the meso level and the macro level are blurry on the continuum. Still, in micro-level social units, you know everyone or at least every person in the social unit knows someone whom you also know. Try the next Engaging Sociology to test your understanding of levels of analysis and the sociological imagination.

We all participate in meso-level social units that are smaller than the nation but can be huge. For example, thousands or even millions of individuals join organizations such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), MoveOn.org, or the environmental group 350.org. Those involved participate in dialogues online and contribute money to these organizations. People living thousands of miles from one another united financially and in spirit to support candidates in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. We share connections with the members of these organizations, and our lives are interconnected, even if we never meet face to face.

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

The Social World Model and This Book

Throughout this book, we use the social world model as the framework for understanding the social units, the processes, and the surrounding environment. We look at each social unit and process. We take the unit out, examine it, and then return it to its place in the interconnected social world model so that you can comprehend the whole social world and its parts, like putting a puzzle together. In doing so, we gain a more complete and accurate perspective on the social world. Look for the model at the beginning of every chapter.

Micro-Meso-Macro

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

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

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

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

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

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

they know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows the person in question.

ENGAGING SOCIOLOGY

MICRO, MESO, MACRO

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

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

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

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

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

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

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

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think of a problem that impacts you personally (e.g., the high cost of tuition, unemployment, or divorce) and explain how you would make sense of it differently if you viewed it as (a) only a personal problem or (b) influenced by a public issue. How do possible solutions to the problem differ depending on how you view it?
2. How can sociology help you become a more informed citizen and better able to understand how government policies impact society?
3. What are three ways the sociological perspective can help you succeed in college and the workforce?

4. Think of some of the ways the social institutions of government and education are connected. Why is it in the interest of the government to support higher education? How has government support (or lack of support) impacted your college experience?
5. Imagine you would like to look at reasons behind the high college dropout rate in the United States. How might your explanations differ based on whether your analysis was on the micro, meso, or macro level? Why? Which level or levels would you focus on for your study? Why?

KEY TERMS

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| environment (p. 16) | social institutions (p. 15) |
| globalization (p. 7) | social processes (p. 16) |
| levels of analysis (p. 13) | social structure (p. 15) |
| macro-level analysis (p. 19) | social units (p. 15) |
| meso-level analysis (p. 18) | social world model (p. 14) |
| micro-level analysis (p. 17) | sociological imagination (p. 9) |
| national society (p. 16) | sociology (p. 6) |

CONTRIBUTING TO OUR SOCIAL WORLD: WHAT CAN WE DO?

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

At the Local (Micro) Level

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

At the Regional (Meso) Level

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

At the National or Global (Macro) Levels

- *The American Sociological Association (ASA)* is the leading professional organization of sociologists in the United States. Visit the ASA website and take a look around it. You will find many programs and initiatives of special interest to students. If you are interested in becoming a sociologist, be sure to look at the links under the heading “Career Center.” The ASA also sponsors an Honors Program at its annual meeting that introduces students to the profession and gives students a heads-up on being successful in sociology.
- *The International Sociological Association (ISA)* serves sociologists from around the world. Every 4 years, the ISA sponsors a large meeting. Specialty groups within the ISA hold smaller conferences throughout the world during the other years.

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