Even from the glow of the faded red-and-white exit sign, its faint light barely illuminating the upper bunk, I could see that the sheet was filthy. Resigned to another night of fitful sleep, I reluctantly crawled into bed.

I kept my clothes on.

The next morning, I joined the long line of disheveled men leaning against the chain-link fence. Their faces were as downcast as their clothes were dirty. Not a glimmer of hope among them.

No one spoke as the line slowly inched forward.

When my turn came, I was handed a cup of coffee, a white plastic spoon, and a bowl of semiliquid that I couldn’t identify. It didn’t look like any food I had seen before. Nor did it taste like anything I had ever eaten.

My stomach fought the foul taste, every spoonful a battle. But I was determined. “I will experience what they experience,” I kept telling myself. My stomach reluctantly gave in and accepted its morning nourishment.

The room was strangely silent. Hundreds of men were eating, each one immersed in his own private hell, his mind awash with disappointment, remorse, bitterness.

As I stared at the Styrofoam cup that held my coffee, grateful for at least this small pleasure, I noticed what looked like teeth marks. I shrugged off the thought, telling myself that my long weeks as a sociological observer of the homeless were finally getting to me. “It must be some sort of crease from handling,” I concluded.

I joined the silent ranks of men turning in their bowls and cups. When I saw the man behind the counter swishing out Styrofoam cups in a washtub of murky water, I began to feel sick to my stomach. I knew then that the jagged marks on my cup really had come from another person’s mouth.

How much longer did this research have to last? I felt a deep longing to return to my family—to a welcome world of clean sheets, healthy food, and “normal” conversations.
The Sociological Perspective

Why were these men so silent? Why did they receive such despicable treatment? What was I doing in that homeless shelter? After all, I hold a respectable, professional position, and I have a home and family.

Sociology offers a perspective, a view of the world. The sociological perspective (or imagination) opens a window onto unfamiliar worlds—and offers a fresh look at familiar ones. In this text, you will find yourself in the midst of Nazis in Germany and warriors in South America, as well as among people who live in a city dump. (If you want to jump ahead, you can see the photos I took of the people who live in a dump in Cambodia: pages 000–000.) You will also find yourself looking at your own world in a different light. As you view other worlds—or your own—the sociological perspective enables you to gain a new perception of social life. In fact, this is what many find appealing about sociology.

The sociological perspective has been a motivating force in my own life. Ever since I took my introductory course in sociology, I have been enchanted by the perspective that sociology offers. I have enjoyed both observing other groups and questioning my own assumptions about life. I sincerely hope the same happens to you.

Seeing the Broader Social Context

The sociological perspective stresses the social contexts in which people live. It examines how these contexts influence people’s lives. At the center of the sociological perspective is the question of how groups influence people, especially how people are influenced by their society—a group of people who share a culture and a territory.

To find out why people do what they do, sociologists look at social location, the corners in life that people occupy because of where they are located in a society. Sociologists look at how jobs, income, education, gender, age, and race–ethnicity affect people’s ideas and behavior. Consider, for example, how being identified with a group called females or with a group called males when you were growing up has shaped your ideas of who you are. Growing up as a female or a male has influenced not only how you feel about yourself but also your ideas of what you should attain in life and how you relate to others.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) put it this way: “The sociological imagination [perspective] enables us to grasp the connection between history and biography.” By history, Mills meant that each society is located in a broad stream of events. This gives each society specific characteristics—such as its ideas about the proper roles of men and women. By biography, Mills referred to the specific experiences that give individuals their orientations to life. In short, people don’t do what they do because they inherited some internal mechanism, such as instincts. Rather, external influences—our experiences—become part of our thinking and motivation. In short, the society in which we grow up, and our particular location in that society, lie at the center of what we do and how we think.

Consider a newborn baby. As you know, if we were to take the baby away from its U.S. parents and place it with the Yanomamō Indians in the jungles of South America, when the child began to speak, his or her words would not be in English. You also know that the child would not think like an American. The child would not grow up wanting credit cards, for example,
or designer clothes, a car, a cell phone, an iPod, and the latest video game. He or she would take his or her place in Yanomamö society—perhaps as a food gatherer, a hunter, or a warrior—and would not even know about the world left behind at birth. And, whether male or female, the child would grow up assuming that it is natural to want many children, not debating whether to have one, two, or three children.

People around the globe take their particular views of the world for granted. Something inside us Americans tells us that hamburgers are delicious, small families desirable, and designer clothing attractive. Yet something inside some of the Sinai Desert Arab tribes tells them that warm, fresh camel’s blood makes a fine drink and that everyone should have a large family and wear flowing robes (Murray 1935; McCabe and Ellis 1990). And that something certainly isn’t an instinct. As sociologist Peter Berger (1963) phrased it, that “something” is society within us.

Although obvious, this point frequently eludes us. We often think and talk about people’s behavior as though it were caused by their sex (“men are like that”), their race (they are like that), or some other factor transmitted by their genes. The sociological perspective helps us escape from this cramped, personal view by exposing the broader social context that underlies human behavior. It helps us see the links between what people do and the social settings that shape their behavior.

If you have been thinking along with me—and I hope you have—you should be thinking about how your social groups have shaped your ideas and desires. Over and over in this text, you will see that the way you look at the world is the result of your exposure to specific human groups. I think you will enjoy the process of self-discovery that sociology offers.

The Global Context—and the Local

As is evident to all of us—from the labels on our clothing that say Hong Kong, Brunei, or Macau, to the many other imported products that have become part of our daily lives—our world has become a global village. How life has changed! Our predecessors lived on isolated farms and in small towns. They grew their own food and made their own goods, buying some sugar, coffee, and a few other items that they couldn’t produce. Beyond the borders of their communities lay a world they perceived only dimly.

And how slow communications used to be! In December 1814, the United States and Great Britain signed a peace treaty to end the War of 1812. Yet two weeks later their armies fought a major battle in New Orleans. The armed forces there had not heard that the war was over (Volti 1995).

Even though we can now pick up a telephone or use the Internet to communicate instantly with people anywhere on the planet, we continue to occupy our own little corners of life. Like those of our predecessors, our worlds, too, are marked by differences in family background, religion, job, gender, race–ethnicity, and social class. In these corners, we continue to learn distinctive ways of viewing the world.

One of the beautiful—and fascinating—aspects of sociology is that it enables us to analyze both parts of our current reality: the changes that incorporate us into a global network and our unique experiences in our smaller corners of life. In this text, we shall examine both of these vital aspects of our lives.

Sociology and the Other Sciences

Just as humans today have an intense desire to unravel the mysteries around them, so did people in ancient times. Their explanations were not based on observations alone, however, but were also mixed with magic and superstition.

To satisfy their basic curiosities about the world, humans gradually developed science, systematic methods to study the social and natural worlds and the knowledge obtained by those methods. Sociology, the study of society and human behavior, is one of these sciences.

A useful way of comparing these sciences—and of gaining a better understanding of sociology’s place—is to divide them into the natural and the social sciences.
The Natural Sciences

The natural sciences are the intellectual and academic disciplines that are designed to explain and predict the events in our natural environment. The natural sciences are divided into specialized fields of research according to subject matter, such as biology, geology, chemistry, and physics. These are further subdivided into even more highly specialized areas. Biology is divided into botany and zoology; geology into mineralogy and geomorphology; chemistry into its organic and inorganic branches; and physics into biophysics and quantum mechanics. Each area of investigation examines a particular “slice” of nature.

The Social Sciences

People have not limited themselves to investigating nature. To try to understand life, they have also developed fields of science that focus on the social world. The social sciences examine human relationships. Just as the natural sciences attempt to objectively understand the world of nature, the social sciences attempt to objectively understand the social world. Just as the world of nature contains ordered (or lawful) relationships that are not obvious but must be discovered through controlled observations, so the ordered relationships of the human or social world are not obvious and must be revealed by means of repeated observations.

Like the natural sciences, the social sciences are divided into specialized fields based on their subject matter. These divisions are anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology. The social sciences are subdivided further into specialized fields. Thus, anthropology is divided into cultural and physical anthropology; economics has macro (large-scale) and micro (small-scale) specialties; political science has theoretical and applied branches; psychology may be clinical or experimental; and sociology has its quantitative and qualitative branches. Since our focus is sociology, let’s contrast sociology with each of the other social sciences.

Anthropology. Anthropology, which traditionally focuses on tribal peoples, is closely related to sociology. The chief concern of anthropologists is to understand culture, a people’s total way of life. Culture includes a group’s (1) artifacts, such as its tools, art, and weapons; (2) structure, the patterns that determine how its members interact with one another (such as positions of leadership); (3) ideas and values, the ways the group’s beliefs affect its members’ lives; and (4) forms of communication, especially language.

Graduate students working on their doctorate in anthropology usually spend a period of time living with a tribal group. In their reports, they emphasize the group’s family (kin) relationships. As there are no “undiscovered” groups left in the world, this focus on tribal groups is giving way to the study of groups in industrialized settings. When anthropologists study the same groups that sociologists do, they place greater emphasis on artifacts, authority (hierarchy), and language, especially kinship terms.

Economics. Economics concentrates on a single social institution. Economists study the production and distribution of the material goods and services of a society. They want to know what goods are being produced, what they cost, and how those goods are distributed. Economists also are interested in the choices that determine production and consumption; for example, they study what motivates people to buy a certain item instead of another.

Political Science. Political science focuses on politics and government. Political scientists examine how governments are formed, how they operate, and how they are related to other institutions of society. Political scientists are especially interested in how people attain ruling positions in their society, how they maintain those positions, and the consequences of their actions for the people they govern.

Psychology. The focus of psychology is on processes that occur within the individual, inside what they call the “skin-bound organism.” Experimental psychologists do research on intelligence, emotions, perception, memory, even dreams. Some study how personality is formed and the causes of mental illness. Clinical psychologists work as therapists,
helping people resolve personal problems, such as recovering from abuse or addiction to drugs. Others work as counselors in school and work settings, where they give personality tests, intelligence tests, and vocational aptitude tests.

**Sociology.** Sociology overlaps these other social sciences. Like anthropologists, sociologists also study culture; they, too, do research on group structure and belief systems, as well as on how people communicate with one another. Like economists, sociologists do research on how a society’s goods and services are distributed, especially how that distribution results in inequality. Like political scientists, sociologists study how people govern one another, especially how those in power affect people’s lives. And like psychologists, sociologists also study how people adjust to the difficulties of life.

With such similarities, what distinguishes sociology from the other social sciences? Unlike anthropologists, sociologists focus primarily on industrialized societies. Unlike economists and political scientists, sociologists do not concentrate on a single social institution. And unlike psychologists, sociologists stress factors external to the individual to determine what influences people and how they adjust to life. These differences might not be entirely clear, so let’s go to the Down-to-Earth Sociology box below and, in an updated ancient tale, consider how members of different disciplines might perceive the same subject matter.

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**Down-to-Earth Sociology**

**An Updated Version of the Old Elephant Story**

It is said that in the recent past, five wise men and women, all blindfolded, were led to an elephant and asked to explain what they “saw.” The first, an anthropologist, tenderly touching the trunk and the tusks, broke into a grin and said, “This is really primitive. I feel very comfortable here. Concentrate on these.”

The second, an economist, feeling the mouth, said, “This is what counts. What goes in here is distributed throughout the body. Concentrate your research on how it is distributed.”

The third, a political scientist, feeling the gigantic ears, announced, “This is the power center. What goes in here controls the entire body. Concentrate your studies here.”

The fourth, a psychologist, stroking the top of the elephant’s head, smiled contentedly and said, “This is the only thing that counts. All feeling and thinking take place inside here. To understand this beast, we’ll study this part.”

Then came the sociologist (of course!), who, after feeling the entire body, said, “You can’t understand the beast by concentrating on only one part. Each is but part of the whole. The trunk and tusks, the mouth, the ears, the head—all are important. But so are the parts of the beast that you haven’t mentioned. We must remove our blindfolds so we can see the larger picture. We have to see how everything works together to form the entire animal.”

Pausing for emphasis, the sociologist added, “And we also need to understand how this creature interacts with similar creatures. How does its life in groups influence its behavior?”

I wish I could conclude this tale by saying that the anthropologist, the economist, the political scientist, and the psychologist were dazzled on hearing the wisdom of the sociologist, and, amidst gasps of wonderment, they tore off their blindfolds, joined together, and began to examine the entire animal. But, alas and alack! On hearing this sage advice, the specialists stubbornly bound their blindfolds even tighter so they could concentrate all the more on their particular part. And if you listened very, very carefully, you could even hear them mutter, “Don’t touch the tusks.” “Stay away from the mouth—that’s my area.” “Take your hand off the ears.” “The top of the head is mine—stay away from it.”
The Goals of Science
The first goal of each science is to explain why something happens. The second goal is to make generalizations, that is, to go beyond the individual case and make statements that apply to a broader group or situation. For example, a sociologist wants to explain not only why Mary went to college or became an armed robber but also why people with her characteristics are more likely than others to go to college or to become armed robbers. To achieve generalizations, sociologists look for patterns, recurring characteristics or events. The third scientific goal is to predict, to specify in the light of current knowledge what will happen in the future.

To attain these goals, scientists do not rely on magic, superstition, or common beliefs, but, instead, they do systematic research. They explain exactly how they did their research so it can be reviewed by others. Secrecy, prejudice, and other biases go against the grain of science.

Sociologists and other scientists also move beyond common sense—the prevailing ideas in a society, the things that “everyone knows” are true. “Everyone” can be misguided today just as everyone was wrong when common sense dictated that the world was flat or that no human could ever walk on the moon. As sociologists do their research, their findings may confirm or contradict commonsense notions about social life. To test your own “common sense,” take the “fun quiz” on the next page.

The Risks of Being a Sociologist. Sometimes the explorations of sociologists take them into nooks and crannies that people would prefer remain unexplored. For example, a sociologist might study how people make decisions to commit a crime or to cheat on their spouses. Since sociologists want above all to understand social life, they don’t cease their studies because people feel uncomfortable. Sociologists consider all realms of human life legitimate avenues to explore, and they do so, from the respectable to the downright disreputable.

As they examine how groups operate, sociologists sometimes face pressure to keep things secret. Every group, it seems, nourishes some ideal image that it presents to others. Because sociologists are interested in knowing what is really going on, they peer behind the scenes to get past those sugar-coated images (Berger 1963; 2007). This can threaten groups that are being studied, leading to pressure and conflict—all part of the adventure, and risk, of being a sociologist.

Origins of Sociology

Tradition Versus Science
Ancient peoples tried to figure out how social life works. They asked questions about why war exists, why some people become more powerful than others, and why some are rich but others are poor. However, they often based their answers on superstition, myth, or even the positions of the stars, and they did not test their assumptions.

Science, in contrast, requires theories that can be tested by research. Measured by this standard, sociology emerged about the middle of the 1800s, when social observers began to use scientific methods to test their ideas. Three main events set the stage for the challenge to tradition and the emergence of sociology.

The first was the social upheaval of the Industrial Revolution. As agriculture gave way to factory production, masses of people moved to cities in search of work. The city’s greeting was harsh: miserable pay, long hours, and dangerous work. To help their family survive, even children worked in these miserable conditions, some of them chained to machines to keep them from running away. With their ties to the land broken and their world turned upside down, no longer could people count on tradition to provide the answers to the difficult questions of life.

The second was the social upheaval of revolution. The American and French revolutions swept away the existing social orders—and with them the answers they had provided.
Before this period, tradition had ruled. The reply to questions of “why” was “We do this because it has always been done this way.” A new social order challenges traditional answers, stimulates original thinking, and brings new ideas. The ideas that emerged during this period challenged tradition even further. Especially powerful was the idea that individuals possess inalienable rights. This idea caught fire to such an extent that people were willing to die for it, forcing many traditional Western monarchies to give way to more democratic forms of government.

The third was the imperialism (empire building) of the time. The Europeans had conquered many parts of the world, and their new colonies stretched from Asia and Africa to North and South America. Exposed to radically different ways of life, they began to ask why cultures differ.

About this same time that people were finding traditional answers inadequate, the scientific method—using objective, systematic observations to test theories—was being tried out in chemistry and physics. The result was the uncovering of many secrets that had been concealed in nature. With traditional answers failing, the logical step was to apply the scientific method to questions about social life. The result was the birth of sociology.

**Auguste Comte and Positivism**

Applying the scientific method to the social world, a process known as positivism, apparently was first proposed by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Reflecting on the upheavals of the French Revolution and on the changes he experienced when he moved to Paris from the small town in which he had grown up, Comte became interested in what holds society together. He began to ask what creates social order, instead of anarchy or chaos. And once society does become set on a particular course, what causes it to change, he wondered.

Comte decided that the scientific method was the key to answering such questions. Just as the scientific method had revealed the law of gravity, so, too, it would uncover the laws that underlie society. Comte called this new science sociology—“the study of society” (from the Greek logos, “study of,” and the Latin socius, “companion,” “or “being with others”). The purpose of this new science, he said, would be not only to discover social principles but also to apply them to social reform. Comte developed a grandiose view: Sociologists would reform the entire society, making it a better place to live.
How to apply the scientific method to social life meant something quite different to Comte than it does to us. To him, it meant a kind of “armchair philosophy”—drawing conclusions from informal observations of social life. Comte did not do what we today call research, and his conclusions have been abandoned. Nevertheless, Comte’s insistence that we must observe and classify human activities to uncover society’s fundamental laws is well taken. Because he developed and coined the term sociology, Comte often is credited with being the founder of sociology.

Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who grew up in England, is sometimes called the second founder of sociology. Spencer disagreed sharply with Comte. He said that sociology should not guide social reform. Societies go through a natural evolution, he said, evolving from lower (“barbarian”) to higher (“civilized”) forms. This natural process improves societies. As generations pass, the most capable and intelligent (“the fittest”) members of a society survive, while the less capable die out. The fittest members will produce a more advanced society—unless misguided do-gooders get in the way and help the less fit (the lower classes) survive.

Spencer called this principle the survival of the fittest. Although Spencer coined this phrase, it usually is attributed to his contemporary, Charles Darwin, who proposed that organisms evolve over time as they adapt to their environment. Where Darwin refers to the evolution of organisms, Spencer refers to the evolution of societies. Because Darwin is better known, Spencer’s idea is called social Darwinism. (If fame had gone the other way, we might be speaking of “biological Spencerism.”)
Spencer’s idea that it was wrong to help the poor offended many. Many wealthy businessmen of the time, however, liked the concept of the survival of the fittest: They saw themselves as “the fittest”—and therefore superior. I’m sure that Spencer’s views also helped some of them avoid feeling guilty for living like royalty while people around them went hungry.

Like Comte, Spencer did armchair philosophy instead of conducting scientific studies. His ideas about society became popular, and he was sought after as a speaker in both England and the United States. Eventually social Darwinism was discredited, and few today remember Spencer.

**Karl Marx and Class Conflict**

Karl Marx (1818–1883) not only influenced sociology but also left his mark on world history. Marx’s influence has been so great that even the *Wall Street Journal*, that staunch advocate of capitalism, has called him one of the three greatest modern thinkers (the other two being Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein).

Like Comte, Marx thought that people should try to change society. His proposal for change was radical: revolution. This got him thrown out of Germany, and he settled in England. Marx believed that the engine of human history is class conflict. Society is made up of two social classes, he said, and they are natural enemies: the bourgeoisie (boo-shwa-ZEE) (the capitalists, those who own the capital, land, factories, and machines) and the proletariat (the exploited workers, who do not own the means of production). Eventually, the workers will unite and break their chains of bondage. The revolution will be bloody, but it will usher in a classless society, one free of exploitation. People will work according to their abilities and receive goods and services according to their needs (Marx and Engels 1848/1967).

Marxism is not the same as communism. Although Marx proposed revolution as the way for workers to gain control of society, he did not develop the political system called communism. This is a later application of his ideas. Marx himself felt disgusted when he heard debates about his insights into social life. After listening to some of the positions attributed to him, he shook his head and said, “I am not a Marxist” (Dobriner 1969b:222; Gitlin 1997:89).

Unlike Comte and Spencer, Marx did not think of himself as a sociologist—and with his reputation for communism and revolution, many sociologists wish that no one else did either. Marx spent years studying in the library of the British Museum in London, where he wrote widely on history, philosophy, economics, and political science. Because of his insights into the relationship between the social classes, Marx is generally recognized as a significant early sociologist. He introduced *conflict theory*, one of today’s major perspectives in sociology. Later in this book, we will examine this perspective in detail.

The French Revolution of 1789 not only overthrew the aristocracy but also upset the entire social order. This extensive change removed the past as a sure guide to the present. The events of this period stimulated Auguste Comte to analyze how societies change. His writings are often taken as the origin of sociology. This painting shows a crowd of women marching to Versailles to capture the royal family.
Emile Durkheim and Social Integration

The primary professional goal of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was to get sociology recognized as a separate academic discipline (Coser 1977). Until Durkheim’s time, sociology was viewed as part of history and economics. Durkheim, who grew up in eastern France and was educated in both Germany and France, achieved his goal in 1887 when the University of Bordeaux awarded him the world’s first academic appointment in sociology.

Durkheim’s second goal was to show how social forces affect people’s behavior. To accomplish this, he conducted rigorous research. Comparing the suicide rates of several European countries, Durkheim (1897/1966) found that each country has a different suicide rate—and that these rates remain about the same year after year. He also found that different groups within a country have different suicide rates and that these, too, remain stable from year to year. His data showed that Protestants, males, and the unmarried kill themselves at a higher rate than do Catholics or Jews, females, and the married. From these observations, Durkheim concluded that suicide is not what it appears—simply a matter of individuals here and there deciding to take their lives for personal reasons. Instead, social factors underlie suicide, which is why a group’s rate remains fairly constant year after year.

Durkheim identified social integration, the degree to which people are tied to their social group, as a key social factor in suicide. He concluded that people who have weaker social ties are more likely to commit suicide. This, he said, explains why Protestants, males, and the unmarried have higher suicide rates. This is how it works: Protestantism encourages greater freedom of thought and action; males are more independent than females; and the unmarried lack the ties and responsibilities that come with marriage. In other words, members of these groups have fewer of the social bonds that keep people from committing suicide. In Durkheim’s term, they have less social integration.

Although strong social ties help protect people from suicide, Durkheim noted that in some instances strong bonds encourage suicide. An example is people who, torn apart by grief, kill themselves after their spouse dies. Their own feelings are so integrated with those of their spouse that they prefer death rather than life without the one who gave it meaning.

Despite the many years that have passed since Durkheim did his research, the principle he uncovered still applies: People who are less socially integrated have higher rates of suicide. Even today, those same groups that Durkheim identified—Protestants, males, and the unmarried—are more likely to kill themselves.

Here is the principle that was central in Durkheim’s research: Human behavior cannot be understood only in terms of the individual; we must always examine the social forces that affect people’s lives. Suicide, for example, appears to be such an intensely individual act that psychologists should study it, not sociologists. As Durkheim stressed, however, if we
look at human behavior only in reference to the individual, we miss its social basis. For another glimpse of what Durkheim meant, look at Figure 1.1, which shows the methods by which African Americans and whites commit suicide. I’m sure you’ll be struck by how similar their methods are. It might surprise you that the patterns are so consistent that we can predict, with high accuracy, that 29,000 whites and 2,000 African Americans will commit suicide this year. The patterns are so detailed and precise that we can also predict that of the 29,000 whites about 15,500 will use guns to kill themselves, and that of the 2,000 African Americans 60 to 70 will jump to their deaths. Since these patterns recur year after year, they indicate something far beyond individuals. They reflect conditions in society, such as the popularity and accessibility of guns. They also reflect conditions that we don’t understand. I am hoping that one day this textbook will pique a student’s interest enough to investigate such matters.

Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic

Max Weber (Mahx VAY-ber) (1864–1920), a German sociologist and a contemporary of Durkheim’s, also held professorships in the new academic discipline of sociology. Like Durkheim and Marx, Weber is one of the most influential of all sociologists, and you will come across his writings and theories in later chapters. Let’s consider an issue Weber raised that remains controversial today.

Religion and the Origin of Capitalism. Weber disagreed with Marx’s claim that economics is the central force in social change. That role, he said, belongs to religion. Weber (1904/1958) theorized that the Roman Catholic belief system encouraged followers to hold on to traditional ways of life, while the Protestant belief system encouraged its members to embrace change. Roman Catholics were taught that because they were church members they were on the road to heaven, but Protestants, those of the Calvinist tradition, were told that they wouldn’t know if they were saved until Judgment Day. Uncomfortable with this, they began to look for “signs” that they were in God’s will. They concluded that financial success was the blessing that indicated that God was on their side. To bring about this “sign” and receive spiritual comfort, they began to live frugal lives, saving their money and investing it in order to make even more. This, said Weber, brought about the birth of capitalism.

Weber called this self-denying approach to life the Protestant ethic. He termed the readiness to invest capital in order to make more money the spirit of capitalism. To test
his theory, Weber compared the extent of capitalism in Roman Catholic and Protestant countries. In line with his theory, he found that capitalism was more likely to flourish in Protestant countries. Weber's conclusion that religion was the key factor in the rise of capitalism was controversial when he made it, and it continues to be debated today (Wade 2007). We'll explore these ideas in more detail in Chapter 7.

Values in Sociological Research

Weber raised another issue that remains controversial among sociologists. He said that sociology should be **value free**. By this, he meant that a sociologist's **values**—beliefs about what is good or desirable in life and the way the world ought to be—should not affect his or her research. Weber wanted **objectivity**, value neutrality, to be the hallmark of social research. If values influence research, he said, sociological findings will be biased.

That bias has no place in research is not a matter of debate. All sociologists agree that no one should distort data to make them fit preconceived ideas or personal values. It is equally clear, however, that because sociologists—like everyone else—are members of a particular society at a given point in history, they, too, are infused with values of all sorts. These values inevitably play a role in the topics we choose to research. For example, values are part of the reason that one sociologist chooses to do research on the Mafia, while another turns a sociological eye on kindergarten students.

Because values can lead to unintended distortions in how we interpret our findings, sociologists stress the need of **replication**, repeating a study in order to compare the new results with the original findings. If an individual's values have distorted research findings, replication by other sociologists should uncover the bias and correct it.

Despite this consensus, however, values remain a hotly debated topic in sociology (Burawoy 2007; Piven 2007). As summarized in Figure 1.2, the disagreement centers on the proper purposes and uses of sociology. Regarding its **purpose**, some sociologists take the position that their goal should be simply to advance understanding of social life. They should gather data on any topic in which they are interested and then use the best theory available to interpret their findings. Others are convinced that sociologists have the responsibility to investigate the social arrangements that harm people—the causes of poverty, crime, racism, war, and other forms of human exploitation.

Then there is the disagreement over the **uses** of sociology. Those who say that sociology's purpose is to understand human behavior take the position that there is no specific use for the knowledge gained by social research. This knowledge belongs to both the scientific community and the world, and it can be used by anyone for any purpose. In contrast, those who say that sociologists should focus on investigating harmful social conditions take the position that sociological knowledge should be used to alleviate human suffering and improve society. Some also say that sociologists should spearhead social reform.

Although this debate is more complicated than the argument summarized here—few sociologists take such one-sided views—this sketch does identify its major issues. Here is how sociologist John Galliher (1991) expresses today’s majority position:

**Some argue that social scientists, unlike politicians and religious leaders, should merely attempt to describe and explain the events of the world but should never make value judgments based on those observations. Yet a value-free and nonjudgmental social science has no place in a world that has experienced the Holocaust, in a world having had slavery, in a world with the ever-present threat of rape and other sexual assault, in a world with frequent, unpunished crimes in high places, including the production of products known**
by their manufacturers to cause death and injury as has been true of asbestos products and continues to be true of the cigarette industry, and in a world dying from environmental pollution by these same large multinational corporations.

Verstehen and Social Facts

Weber and Verstehen

Weber also stressed that to understand human behavior, we should use Verstehen (vare-stay-in) (a German word meaning “to understand”). Perhaps the best translation of this term is “to grasp by insight.” By emphasizing Verstehen, Weber meant that the best interpreter of human behavior is someone who “has been there,” someone who can understand the feelings and motivations of the people being studied. In short, we must pay attention to what are called subjective meanings—how people interpret their situation in life, how they view what they are doing and what is happening to them.

To better understand this term, let’s return to the homeless in our opening vignette. As in the photo below, why were the men so silent? Why were they so unlike the noisy, sometimes boisterous college students who swarm dorms and cafeterias?

Verstehen can help explain this. When I interviewed men in the shelters (and, in other settings, homeless women), they revealed their despair. Because you know—at least on some level—what the human emotion of despair is, you can apply your understanding to their situation. You know that people in despair feel a sense of hopelessness. The future looks bleak, hardly worth plodding toward. Consequently, why is it worth talking about? Who wants to hear another hard-luck story?

By applying Verstehen—your understanding of what it means to be human and to face some situation in life—you gain insight into other people’s behavior. In this case, you can understand these men’s silence, their lack of communication in the shelter.

Durkheim and Social Facts

In contrast to Weber’s emphasis on Verstehen and subjective meanings, Durkheim stressed what he called social facts. By this term, he meant the patterns of behavior that characterize a social group. Examples of social facts in the United States include June being the most popular month for weddings, suicide rates being higher among the elderly, and more births occurring on Tuesdays than on any other day of the week.

Durkheim said that we must use social facts to interpret social facts. In other words, each pattern reflects some condition of society. People all over the country don’t just coincidentally decide to do similar things, whether that is to get married or to commit suicide. If this were the case, in some years, middle-aged people would be the most likely to kill themselves, in other years, young people, and so on. Patterns that hold true year after year indicate that as thousands and even millions of people make their individual decisions, they are responding to conditions in their society. It is the job of the sociologist, then, to uncover social facts and to explain them through other social facts. To see how this works, let’s look at how the social facts I mentioned—weddings, suicide, and births—are explained by other social facts.

Granted their deprivation, it is not surprising that the homeless are not brimming with optimism. This scene at a homeless shelter in New York City is typical, reminiscent of the many meals I ate in soup kitchens with men like this.
How Social Facts and Verstehen Fit Together

Social facts and Verstehen go hand in hand. As a member of U.S. society, you know how June weddings are related to the end of the school year and how this month, now locked in tradition, common sentiment, and advertising, carries its own momentum. As for suicide among the elderly (see Chapter 13), you probably already have a sense of the greater despair that many older Americans feel.

But do you know why more Americans are born on Tuesday than on any other day of the week? One would expect Tuesday to be no more common than any other day, and that is how it used to be. But no longer (Martin et al. 2007). To understand this change, we need a combination of social facts and Verstehen. Four social facts are relevant: First, technology has made the hospital a dominating force in the U.S. medical system. Second, medical technology has made births by cesarean section safer. Third, as discussed in Chapter 19 (page 000), doctors have replaced midwives in the delivery of babies. Fourth, medicine in the United States is a business, with profit a major goal. These four social facts have coalesced to make an operation that used to be a last resort for emergencies so routine that 30 percent of all U.S. babies are now delivered in this manner (Martin et al. 2007).

If we add Verstehen to these social facts, we gain insight that goes far beyond the cold statistics. We can understand that most mothers-to-be prefer to give birth in a hospital and that, under the influence of physicians at an emotionally charged moment, alternatives appear quite slim. We can also understand that physicians schedule births for a time that is most convenient for them. Tuesday is the day that fits their schedules the best.

Sociology in North America

Transplanted to U.S. soil, sociology first took root at the University of Kansas in 1890, at the University of Chicago in 1892, and at Atlanta University (then an all-black school) in 1897. From there, sociology spread rapidly throughout North America, jumping from four instructors offering courses in 1880 to 225 instructors and 59 sociology departments just 20 years later (Lengermann and Niebrugge 2007).

Some universities were slow to adopt sociology. Not until 1922 did McGill University become Canada’s first department of sociology. Harvard University did not open its sociology department until 1930, and it took until the 1950s for the University of California at Berkeley to do so.

The University of Chicago initially dominated North American sociology. Albion Small (1854–1926), who founded this department, also launched the American Journal of Sociology and was its editor from 1895 to 1925. Members of this sociology faculty whose ideas continue to influence today’s sociologists include Robert E. Park (1864–1944), Ernest Burgess (1886–1966), and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Mead developed the symbolic interactionist perspective, which we will examine later.

Sexism at the Time: Women in Early Sociology

As you may have noticed, all the sociologists we have discussed are men. In the 1800s, sex roles were rigid, with women assigned the roles of wife and mother. In the classic German phrase, women were expected to devote themselves to the four K’s: Kirche, Küchen, Kinder, und Kleider (church, cooking, children, and clothes). Trying to break out of this mold meant risking severe disapproval.

Few people, male or female, attained any education beyond basic reading and writing and a little math. Higher education, for the rare few who received it, was reserved primarily for men. Of the handful of women who did pursue higher education, some became prominent in early sociology. Marion Talbot, for example, was an associate editor of the American Journal of Sociology for thirty years, from its founding in 1895 to 1925. The influence of some early female sociologists went far beyond sociology. Grace Abbott became chief of the U.S. government’s Children’s Bureau, and Frances Perkins was the first woman to hold a cabinet position, serving twelve years as Secretary of Labor under President Franklin Roosevelt. On the next page are photos of some of these early sociologists.
Many early female sociologists wrote extensively. Their writings—and matching social activism—were directed almost exclusively at social reform, such as ways to improve the working conditions of poorly paid workers, the integration of immigrants into society, and the anti-lynching movement. As sociology developed in North America, a prolonged debate ensued about the proper purpose of sociology. You are already familiar with this tension: Should the purpose of sociology be social reform or objective analysis? This debate on advocacy versus objectivity was won by men who held university positions, men who feared that advocacy for social causes would jeopardize the reputation of sociology—and their own university positions. It was these men who wrote the history of sociology. Distancing themselves from the social reformers, they ignored the early female sociologists when they recounted the development of sociology (Lengermann and Niebrugge 2007). Now that women have again become a voice in sociology—and have begun to rewrite its history—early female sociologists are slowly being acknowledged.
Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) provides a classic example of how the contributions of early female sociologists were ignored. Although Martineau was from England, she is included here because she did extensive analyses of U.S. social customs. Sexism was so pervasive that when Martineau first began to analyze social life, she would hide her writing beneath her sewing when visitors arrived, for writing was “masculine” and sewing “feminine” (Gilman 1911/1971:88). Despite her extensive and acclaimed research on social life in both Great Britain and the United States, until recently Martineau was known primarily for translating Comte’s ideas into English. The Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page features Martineau’s research on the United States.

Racism at the Time: W. E. B. Du Bois

Not only was sexism assumed to be normal during this early period of sociology, but so was racism, which made life difficult for African American professionals such as W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963). After earning a bachelor's degree from Fisk University, Du Bois became the first African American to earn a doctorate at Harvard. He then studied at the University of Berlin, where he attended lectures by Max Weber. After teaching Greek and Latin at Wilberforce University, in 1897 Du Bois moved to Atlanta University to teach sociology and do research. He remained there for most of his career (Du Bois 1935/1992).

It is difficult to grasp how racist society was at this time. As Du Bois passed a butcher shop in Georgia one day, he saw the fingers of a lynching victim displayed in the window (Aptheker 1990). When Du Bois went to national meetings of the American Sociological Society, restaurants and hotels would not allow him to eat or room with the white sociologists. How times have changed. Today, sociologists would not only boycott such establishments, but also refuse to hold meetings in that state. At that time, however, racism, like sexism, prevailed throughout society, rendering it mostly invisible to white sociologists. Du Bois eventually became such an outspoken critic of racism that the U.S. State Department, fearing he would criticize the United States, refused to issue him a passport (Du Bois 1968).

Each year between 1896 and 1914, Du Bois published a book on relations between African Americans and whites. Not content to collect and interpret objective data, Du Bois, along with Jane Addams and others from Hull-House (see page 19), was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Deegan 1988). Continuing to battle racism both as a sociologist and as a journalist, Du Bois eventually embraced revolutionary Marxism. At age 93, dismayed that so little improvement had been made in race relations, he moved to Ghana, where he is buried (Stark 1989).

Until recently, Du Bois’ work was neglected by sociologists. As a personal example, during my entire graduate program at Washington University, the faculty never mentioned him. Today, however, sociologists are rediscovering Du Bois, reading and discussing his research. Of his almost 2,000 writings, The Philadelphia Negro (1899/1967) stands out. In this analysis, Du Bois pointed out that some successful African Americans were breaking their ties with other African Americans in order to win acceptance by whites. This, he said, weakened the African American community by depriving it of their influence. Taken from a 1903 book by Du Bois, the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on page 20 provides a picture of race relations following the Civil War.

Jane Addams: Sociologist and Social Reformer

Of the many early sociologists who combined the role of sociologist with that of social reformer, none was as successful as Jane Addams (1860–1935), who was a member of the American Sociological Society from its founding in 1895. Like Harriet Martineau, Addams, too, came from a background of wealth and privilege. She attended the Women’s Medical College of Philadelphia, but dropped out because of illness (Addams 1910/1981). On a trip to Europe, Addams saw the work being done to help London’s poor. The memory wouldn’t leave her, she said, and she decided to work for social justice.

In 1889, Addams co-founded Hull-House with Ellen Gates Starr. Located in Chicago’s notorious slums, Hull-House was open to people who needed refuge—to immigrants,
The breadth of Martineau’s research is striking. In 1834, two or three decades before Durkheim and Weber were born, Martineau began a two-year study of U.S. customs. Traveling by foot, horseback, stagecoach, and steamboat, she visited twenty of the then twenty-four states. She observed and interviewed Americans, from those who lived in poverty to Andrew Jackson, then the President of the United States, with whom she had dinner (Lengermann and Niebrugge 2007). She spoke with both slaveholders and abolitionists. She also visited prisons and attended sessions of the U.S. Supreme Court. To summarize her research, in 1837 she published *Society in America*, from which these excerpts are taken.

Concerning women not being allowed to vote

One of the fundamental principles announced in the Declaration of Independence is that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. How can the political condition of women be reconciled with this?

Governments in the United States have power to tax women who hold property... to fine, imprison, and execute them for certain offences. Whence do these governments derive their powers? They are not “just,” as they are not derived from the consent of the women thus governed. . . .

The democratic principle condemns all this as wrong; and requires the equal political representation of all rational beings. Children, idiots, and criminals . . . are the only fair exceptions. . . .

Concerning the education of women

The intellect of woman is confined by an unjustifiable restriction. . . . As women have none of the objects in life for which an enlarged education is considered requisite, the education is not given. . . . Some things [are] taught which . . . serve to fill up time . . . to improve conversation, and to make women something like companions to their husbands, and able to teach their children somewhat. . . . There is rarely or never a . . . promotion of clear intellectual activity. . . . As long as women are excluded from the objects for which men are trained . . . intellectual activity is dangerous: or, as the phrase is, unfit. Accordingly marriage is the only object left open to woman.

Concerning sex and slavery, and relations between white women and men in the South

[White American women] are all married young. . . . and there is ever present an unfortunate servile class of their own sex [female slaves] to serve the purposes of licentiousness [as sexual objects for white slaveholders]. . . . [When most] men carry secrets which their wives must be the last to know. . . . There is an end to all wholesome confidence and sympathy, and woman sinks to be the ornament of her husband’s house, the domestic manager of his establishment, instead of being his all-sufficient friend. . . . I have seen, with heart-sorrow, the kind politeness, the gallantry, so insufficient to the loving heart, with which the wives of the south are treated by their husbands. . . . I know the tone of conversation which is adopted towards women; different in its topics and its style from that which any man would dream of offering to any other man. I have heard the boast of chivalrous consideration in which women are held throughout their woman’s paradise; and seen something of the anguish of crushed pride, of the conflict of bitter feelings with which such boasts have been listened to by those whose aspirations teach them the hollowness of the system. . . .

the sick, the aged, the poor. Sociologists from the nearby University of Chicago were frequent visitors at Hull-House. With her piercing insights into the exploitation of workers and the adjustment of immigrants to city life, Addams strove to bridge the gap between the powerful and the powerless. She co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union and campaigned for the eight-hour work day and for laws against child labor. She wrote books on poverty, democracy, and peace. Adams’ writings and efforts at social reform were so outstanding that in 1931, she was a co-winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace. She and Emily Greene Balch are the only sociologists to have won this coveted award.

**Talcott Parsons and C. Wright Mills: Contrasting Views**

Like Du Bois and Addams, many early North American sociologists saw society, or parts of it, as corrupt and in need of reform. During the 1920s and 1930s, for example, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1921) not only studied crime, drug addiction, juvenile
Down-to-Earth Sociology

W. E. B. Du Bois: The Souls of Black Folk

Du Bois wrote more like an accomplished novelist than a sociologist. The following excerpts are from pages 66–68 of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In this book, Du Bois analyzes changes that occurred in the social and economic conditions of African Americans during the thirty years following the Civil War.

For two summers, while he was a student at Fisk, Du Bois taught in a segregated school housed in a log hut “way back in the hills” of rural Tennessee. The following excerpts help us understand conditions at that time.

It was a hot morning late in July when the school opened. I trembled when I heard the patter of little feet down the dusty road, and saw the growing row of dark solemn faces and bright eager eyes facing me. . . . There they sat, nearly thirty of them, on the rough benches, their faces shading from pale cream to deep brown, the little feet bare and swinging, the eyes full of expectation, with here and there a twinkle of mischief, and the hands grasping Webster’s blue-black spelling-book. I loved my school, and the fine faith the children had in the wisdom of their teacher was truly marvelous. We read and spelled together, wrote a little, picked flowers, sang, and listened to stories of the world beyond the hill. . . .

On Friday nights I often went home with some of the children,—sometimes to Doc Burke’s farm. He was a great, loud, thin Black, ever working, and trying to buy these seventy-five acres of hill and dale where he lived; but people said that he would surely fail and the “white folks would get it all.” His wife was a magnificent Amazon, with saffron face and shiny hair, uncorseted and barefooted, and the children were strong and barefooted. They lived in a one-and-a-half-room cabin in the hollow of the farm near the spring. . . .

Often, to keep the peace, I must go where life was less lovely; for instance, “Tildy’s mother was incorrigibly dirty. Reuben’s larder was limited seriously, and herds of untamed insects wandered over the Eddingses’ beds. Best of all I loved to go to Josie’s, and sit on the porch, eating peaches, while the mother bustled and talked: how Josie had bought the sewing-machine; how Josie worked at service in winter; but that four dollars a month was “mighty little” wages; how Josie longed to go away to school, but that it “looked liked” they never could get far enough ahead to let her; how the crops failed and the well was yet unfinished; and, finally, how mean some of the white folks were.

For two summers I lived in this little world. . . . I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it; and yet there was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding; from common hardship in poverty, poor land, and low wages, and, above all, from the sight of the Veil* that hung between us and Opportunity. All this caused us to think some thoughts together; but these, when ripe for speech, were spoken in various languages. Those whose eyes twenty-five and more years had seen “the glory of the coming of the Lord,” saw in every present hindrance or help a dark fatalism bound to bring all things right in His own good time. The mass of those to whom slavery was a dim recollection of childhood found the world a puzzling thing; it asked little of them, and they answered with little, and yet it ridiculed their offering. Such a paradox they could not understand, and therefore sank into listless indifference, or shiftlessness, or reckless bravado.

*“The Veil” is shorthand for the Veil of Race, referring to how race colors all human relations. Du Bois’ hope, as he put it, was that “some-time, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins” (p. 261).
delinquency, and prostitution but also offered suggestions for how to alleviate these social problems. As the emphasis shifted from social reform to objective analyses, the abstract models of society developed by sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) influenced a generation of sociologists. These models of how the parts of society work together harmoniously did nothing to stimulate social activism.

Another sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), deplored such theoretical abstractions. Trying to push the pendulum the other way, he urged sociologists to get back to social reform. In his writings, he warned that the nation faced an imminent threat to freedom—the coalescing of interests of a power elite, the top leaders of business, politics, and the military. The precedent-shaking 1960s and 1970s that followed Mills’ death sparked interest in social activism among a new generation of sociologists.

### The Continuing Tension and Applied Sociology

As we have seen, two apparently contradictory aims—analyzing society versus working toward its reform—have run through North American sociology since its founding. This tension is still with us. As we saw in Figure 1.2 on page 14, some sociologists see their proper role as analyzing some aspect of society and publishing their findings in books and sociology journals. This is called basic (or pure) sociology. Others argue that basic sociology is not enough, that sociologists have an obligation to use their expertise to try to help reform society, especially to help bring justice to the poor and oppressed.

As Figure 1.3 below shows, somewhere between these extremes lies applied sociology, using sociology to solve problems. Applied sociology is not new, for as we’ve seen, sociologists founded the NAACP. The vision that accompanies today’s applied sociology, however, seems considerably less comprehensive. Earlier sociologists saw sociology as a way to reform broad swaths of society. Today’s applied sociologists generally lack such a broad vision, but as illustrated in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page, their application of sociology is wide-ranging. Some work for business firms to solve problems in the workplace, while others investigate social problems such as pornography, rape, pollution, or the spread of AIDS. A new application of sociology is determining ways to disrupt terrorist groups (Sageman 2008).

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**FIGURE 1.3 Comparing Basic and Applied Sociology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BASIC SOCIOLOGY</th>
<th>APPLIED SOCIOLOGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience:</strong> Fellow sociologists and anyone interested</td>
<td><strong>Audience:</strong> Clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product:</strong> Knowledge</td>
<td><strong>Product:</strong> Change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Constructing theory and testing hypotheses
- Research on basic social life, on how groups affect people
- The middle ground: criticisms of society and social policy
- Analyzing problems, evaluating programs, and suggesting solutions
- Implementing solutions (clinical sociology)

Source: By the author. Based on DeMartini 1982.
Although applied sociology pleases many sociologists, it frustrates both those who want the emphasis to be on social reform and those who want it to be on objective analysis. Those who favor social reform point out that the application of sociology in some specific setting is far from an attempt to rebuild society. Those who want sociology’s emphasis to be the discovery of objective knowledge say that when sociology is applied, it is no longer sociology. If, for example, sociologists use sociological principles to help teenagers escape from pimps, they say, what makes it sociology?

This contemporary debate on the purpose and use of sociology, with roots that go back a century or more, is likely to continue for another generation. At this point, let’s consider how theory fits into sociology.

**Down-to-Earth Sociology**

**Careers in Sociology: What Applied Sociologists Do**

Most sociologists teach in colleges and universities, sharing sociological knowledge with students, as your instructor is doing with you in this course. Applied sociologists, in contrast, work in a wide variety of areas—from counseling children to studying how diseases are transmitted. To give you an idea of this variety, let’s look over the shoulders of four applied sociologists.

Leslie Green, who does marketing research at Vandezerve Group in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology at Shippensburg University. She helps to develop strategies to get doctors to prescribe particular drugs. She sets up the meetings, locates moderators for the discussion groups, and arranges payments to the physicians who participate in the research. “My training in sociology,” she says, “helps me in ‘people skills.’ It helps me to understand the needs of different groups, and to interact with them.”

Stanley Capela, whose master’s degree is from Fordham University, works as an applied sociologist at HeartShare Human Services in New York City. He evaluates how children’s programs—such as ones that focus on housing, AIDS, group homes, and preschool education—actually work, compared with how they are supposed to work. He spots problems and suggests solutions. One of his assignments was to find out why it was taking so long to get children adopted, even though there was a long list of eager adoptive parents. Capela pinpointed how the paperwork got bogged down as it was routed through the system and suggested ways to improve the flow of paperwork.

Laurie Banks, who received her master’s degree in sociology from Fordham University, analyzes statistics for the New York City Health Department. As she examined death certificates, she noticed that a Polish neighborhood had a high rate of stomach cancer. She alerted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which conducted interviews in the neighborhood. Scientists from the CDC traced the cause to eating large amounts of sausage. In another case, Banks compared birth certificates with school records. She found that problems at birth—low birth weight, lack of prenatal care, and birth complications—were linked to low reading skills and behavior problems in school.

Daniel Knapp, who earned a doctorate from the University of Oregon, applied sociology by going to the city dump. Moved by the idea that urban wastes could be recycled and reused, he first tested this idea by scavenging in a small way—at the city dump at Berkeley, California. After starting a company called Urban Ore, Knapp (2005) did research on how to recycle urban wastes and worked to change waste disposal laws. As a founder of the recycling movement in the United States, Knapp’s application of sociology continues to influence us all.

From just these few examples, you can catch a glimpse of the variety of work that applied sociologists do. Some work for corporations, some are employed by government and private agencies, and others run their own businesses. You can also see that you don’t need a doctorate in order to work as an applied sociologist.
Facts never interpret themselves. To make sense out of life, we use our common sense. That is, to understand our experiences (our “facts”), we place them into a framework of more-or-less related ideas. Sociologists do this, too, but they place their observations into a conceptual framework called a theory. A theory is a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work. It is an explanation of how two or more “facts” are related to one another.

Sociologists use three major theories: symbolic interactionism, functional analysis, and conflict theory. Let’s look at each theory, first examining its main elements and then applying it to the U.S. divorce rate, to see why it is so high. As we do this, you will see how each theory, or perspective, provides a distinct interpretation of social life.

Symbolic Interactionism

The central idea of symbolic interactionism is that symbols—things to which we attach meaning—are the key to understanding how we view the world and communicate with one another. As discussed on pages 69–70, Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) developed this perspective in sociology. Let’s look at the main elements of this theory.

Symbols in Everyday Life. Without symbols, our social life would be no more sophisticated than that of animals. For example, without symbols we would have no aunts or uncles, employers or teachers—or even brothers and sisters. I know that this sounds strange, but it is symbols that define our relationships. There would still be reproduction, of course, but no symbols to tell us how we are related to whom. We would not know to whom we owe respect and obligations, or from whom we can expect privileges—the essence of human relationships.

Look at it like this: If you think of someone as your aunt or uncle, you behave one way, but if you think of that person as a boyfriend or girlfriend, you behave quite differently. It is the symbol that tells you how you are related to others—and how you should act toward them.
Let’s make this a little less abstract. Consider this example:

Suppose that you have fallen head over heels in love. Finally, after what seems forever, it is the night before your wedding. As you are contemplating tomorrow’s bliss, your mother comes to you in tears. Sobbing, she tells you that she had a child before she married your father, a child that she gave up for adoption. Breaking down, she says that she has just discovered that the person you are going to marry is this child.

You can see how the symbol will change overnight—and your behavior, too!

It is not only relationships that depend on symbols to exist, but even society itself. Without symbols, we could not coordinate our actions with those of others. We could not make plans for a future day, time, and place. Unable to specify times, materials, sizes, or goals, we could not build bridges and highways. Without symbols, there would be no movies or musical instruments. We would have no hospitals, no government, no religion. The class you are taking could not exist—nor could this book. On the positive side, there would be no war.

In Sum: In short, symbolic interactionists analyze how social life depends on the ways we define ourselves and others. They study face-to-face interaction, examining how people make sense out of life and their place in it. Symbolic interactionists point out that even the self is a symbol, for it consists of the ideas we have about who we are. We’ll get more into this later.

Applying Symbolic Interactionism. Look at Figure 1.4, which shows U.S. marriages and divorces over time. Let’s see how symbolic interactionists would use changing symbols to explain this figure. For background, you should understand that marriage used to be a lifelong commitment. A hundred years ago (and less) getting divorced was viewed as immoral, a flagrant disregard for public opinion, and the abandonment of adult responsibilities. Let’s see what changed.

The meaning of marriage: By the 1930s, young people were coming to view marriage in a different way, a change that was reported by sociologists of the time. In 1933, William Ogburn observed that they were placing more emphasis on the personality of potential mates. Then in 1945, Ernest Burgess and Harvey Locke noted that people were expecting
more affection, understanding, and compatibility in marriage. In addition, less and less
people saw marriage as a lifelong commitment based on duty and obligation. As they
began to view marriage as an arrangement that was based on attraction and feelings of
intimacy, it became one that could be broken when feelings changed.

**The meaning of divorce:** As divorce became more common, its meaning changed.
Rather than being a symbol of failure, divorce came to indicate freedom and new begin-
nings. Removing the stigma from divorce shattered a strong barrier that had prevented
husbands and wives from breaking up.

**Changed guidelines:** Related symbols also changed—and none of these changes
strengthened marriage. For example, traditional marriage had firm guidelines, and newly-
weds knew what each was supposed to do regarding work, home, and children. In con-
trast, today’s guidelines are vague, and couples must figure out how to divide up
responsibilities. This can be a struggle, even a source of conflict, and many flounder.
Although couples find it a relief not to have to conform to what they consider to be bur-
densome notions, those traditional expectations (or symbols) did provide a structure that
made marriages last. Changing symbols weakened this structure, making marriage more
fragile and divorce more common.

**The meaning of parenthood:** Ideas of parenthood and childhood also used to be
quite different. Parents had little responsibility for their children beyond providing food,
clothing, shelter, and moral guidance. And they needed to do this for only a short time,
because children began to contribute to the support of the family early in life. Among
many people, parenthood is still like this. In Colombia, for example, children of the poor
often are expected to support themselves by the age of 8 or 10. In industrial societies,
however, we assume that children are vulnerable beings who must depend on their
parents for financial and emotional support for many years—often until they are well
into their 20s. That this is not the case in many cultures often comes as a surprise to
Americans, who assume that their own situation is some sort of worldwide, natural
arrangement. The greater responsibilities that we assign to parenthood place heavy bur-
dens on today’s couples and, with them, more strain on marriage.

**The meaning of love:** And we can’t overlook the love symbol. As surprising as it may
sound, to have love as the main reason for marriage is to weaken marriage. In some
depth of our being, we expect “true love” to deliver constant emotional highs. This ex-
pectation sets people up for crushed hopes, as dissatisfactions in marriage are inevitable.
When they come, spouses tend to blame one another for failing to deliver the expected
satisfaction.

In **Sum:** Symbolic interactionists look at how changing ideas (or symbols) of love, mar-
riage, relationships, parenthood, and divorce put pressure on married couples. No single
change is the cause of our divorce rate, but, taken together, these changes provide a strong
push toward divorce.

**Functional Analysis**
The central idea of **functional analysis** is that society is a whole unit, made up of inter-
related parts that work together. Functional analysis (also known as functionalism and
structural functionalism) is rooted in the origins of sociology. Auguste Comte and Herbert
Spencer viewed society as a kind of living organism. Just as a person or animal has organs
that function together, they wrote, so does society. And like an organism, if society is to
function smoothly, its parts must work together in harmony.

Emile Durkheim also viewed society as being composed of many parts, each with its
own function. When all the parts of society fulfill their functions, society is in a “normal”
state. If they do not fulfill their functions, society is in an “abnormal” or “pathological”
state. To understand society, then, functionalists say that we need to look at both structure
(how the parts of a society fit together to make the whole) and function (what each part
does, how it contributes to society).
Robert Merton and Functionalism. Robert Merton (1910–2003) dismissed the organic analogy, but he did maintain the essence of functionalism—the image of society as a whole composed of parts that work together. Merton used the term *functions* to refer to the beneficial consequences of people’s actions: Functions help keep a group (society, social system) in balance. In contrast, *dysfunctions* are consequences that harm a society: They undermine a system’s equilibrium.

Functions can be either manifest or latent. If an action is *intended* to help some part of a system, it is a *manifest function*. For example, suppose that government officials become concerned about our low rate of childbirth. Congress offers a $10,000 bonus for every child born to a married couple. The intention, or manifest function, of the bonus is to increase childbearing within the family unit. Merton pointed out that people’s actions can also have *latent functions*; that is, they can have *unintended* consequences that help a system adjust. Let’s suppose that the bonus works. As the birth rate jumps, so does the sale of diapers and baby furniture. Because the benefits to these businesses were not the intended consequences, they are latent functions of the bonus.

Of course, human actions can also hurt a system. Because such consequences usually are unintended, Merton called them *latent dysfunctions*. Let’s assume that the government has failed to specify a “stopping point” with regard to its bonus system. To collect more bonuses, some people keep on having children. The more children they have, however, the more they need the next bonus to survive. Large families become common, and poverty increases. Welfare is reinstated, taxes jump, and the nation erupts in protest. Because these results were not intended and because they harmed the social system, they would be latent dysfunctions of the bonus program.

**In Sum:** From the perspective of functional analysis, society is a functioning unit, with each part related to the whole. Whenever we examine a smaller part, we need to look for its functions and dysfunctions to see how it is related to the larger unit. This basic approach can be applied to any social group, whether an entire society, a college, or even a group as small as a family.

**Applying Functional Analysis.** Now let’s apply functional analysis to the U.S. divorce rate. Functionalists stress that industrialization and urbanization undermined the traditional functions of the family. For example, before industrialization, the family formed an economic team. On the farm where most people lived, each family member had jobs or “chores” to do. The wife was in charge not only of household tasks but also of raising small animals, such as chickens. Milking cows, collecting eggs, and churning butter were also her responsibility—as were cooking, baking, canning, sewing, darning, washing, and cleaning. The daughters helped her. The husband was responsible for caring for large animals, such as horses and cattle, for planting and harvesting, and for maintaining buildings and tools. The sons helped him. Together, they formed an economic unit in which each depended on the others for survival.

This certainly doesn’t sound like life today!

Other functions also bound family members to one another: educating the children, teaching them religion, providing home-based recreation, and caring for the sick and elderly. To further see how sharply family functions have changed, look at this example from the 1800s:

When Phil became sick, he was nursed by Ann, his wife. She cooked for him, fed him, changed the bed linens, bathed him, read to him from the Bible, and gave him his medicine. (She did this in addition to doing the housework and taking care of their six children.) Phil was also surrounded by the children, who shouldered some of his chores while he was sick. When Phil died, the male neighbors and relatives made the casket while Ann, her mother, and female friends washed and dressed the body. Phil was then “laid out” in the front parlor (the formal living room), where friends, neighbors, and relatives paid their last respects. From there, friends moved his body to the church for the final message and then to the grave they themselves had dug.

**In Sum:** When the family loses functions, it becomes more fragile, and an increase in divorce is inevitable. Economic production is an excellent example of how the family has
lost functions. No longer is making a living a cooperative, home-based effort, with husband and wife depending on one another for their interlocking contributions to a mutual endeavor. Husbands and wives today earn individual paychecks and increasingly function as separate components in an impersonal, multinational, and even global system. The fewer functions that family members share, the fewer are their “ties that bind”—and these ties are what help husbands and wives get through the problems they inevitably experience.

**Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory provides a third perspective on social life. Unlike the functionalists, who view society as a harmonious whole, with its parts working together, conflict theorists stress that society is composed of groups that are competing with one another for scarce resources. Although the surface may show alliances or cooperation, scratch that surface and you will find a struggle for power.

**Karl Marx and Conflict Theory.** Karl Marx, the founder of conflict theory, witnessed the Industrial Revolution that transformed Europe. He saw that peasants who had left the land to seek work in cities had to work for wages that barely provided enough to eat. Things were so bad that the average worker died at age 30, the average wealthy person at age 50 (Edgerton 1992:87). Shocked by this suffering and exploitation, Marx began to analyze society and history. As he did so, he developed conflict theory. He concluded that the key to human history is class conflict. In each society, some small group controls the means of production and exploits those who are not in control. In industrialized societies, the struggle is between the bourgeoisie, the small group of capitalists who own the means to produce wealth, and the proletariat, the mass of workers who are exploited by the bourgeoisie. The capitalists also control the legal and political system: If the workers rebel, the capitalists call on the power of the state to subdue them.

When Marx made his observations, capitalism was in its infancy and workers were at the mercy of their employers. Workers had none of what we take for granted today—minimum wages, eight-hour days, coffee breaks, five-day work weeks, paid vacations...
and holidays, medical benefits, sick leave, unemployment compensation, Social Security, and, for union workers, the right to strike. Marx’s analysis reminds us that these benefits came not from generous hearts, but by workers forcing concessions from their employers.

Conflict Theory Today. Many sociologists extend conflict theory beyond the relationship of capitalists and workers. They examine how opposing interests permeate every layer of society—whether that be a small group, an organization, a community, or the entire society. For example, when police, teachers, and parents try to enforce conformity, this creates resentment and resistance. It is the same when a teenager tries to “change the rules” to gain more independence. There is, then, a constant struggle throughout society to determine who has authority or influence and how far that dominance goes (Turner 1978; Leeson 2006; Piven 2008).

Sociologist Lewis Coser (1913–2003) pointed out that conflict is most likely to develop among people who are in close relationships. These people have worked out ways to distribute power and privilege, responsibilities and rewards. Any change in this arrangement can lead to hurt feelings, resentment, and conflict. Even in intimate relationships, then, people are in a constant balancing act, with conflict lying uneasily just beneath the surface.

Feminists and Conflict Theory. Just as Marx examined conflict between capitalists and workers, many feminists analyze conflict between men and women. A primary focus is the historical, contemporary, and global inequalities of men and women—and how the traditional dominance by men can be overcome to bring about equality of the sexes. Feminists are not united by the conflict perspective, however. They tackle a variety of topics and use whatever theory applies. (Feminism is discussed in Chapter 11.)

Applying Conflict Theory. To explain why the U.S. divorce rate is high, conflict theorists focus on how men’s and women’s relationships have changed. For millennia, men dominated women. Women had few alternatives other than to accept their exploitation. Then industrialization ushered in a new world, one in which women could meet their basic survival needs outside of marriage. Industrialization also fostered a culture in which females participate in social worlds beyond the home. With this new ability to refuse to bear burdens that earlier generations accepted as inevitable, today’s women are likely to dissolve a marriage that becomes intolerable—or even unsatisfactory.

In Sum: The dominance of men over women was once considered natural and right. As women gained education and earnings, however, they first questioned and then rejected this assumption. As wives strove for more power and grew less inclined to put up with relationships that they defined as unfair, the divorce rate increased. From the conflict perspective, then, our high divorce rate does not mean that marriage has weakened, but, rather, that women are making headway in their historical struggle with men.

Levels of Analysis: Macro and Micro

A major difference between these three theoretical perspectives is their level of analysis. Functionalists and conflict theorists focus on the macro level, that is, they examine large-scale patterns of society. In contrast, symbolic interactionists usually focus on the micro level, on social interaction—what people do when they are in one another’s presence. These levels are summarized in Table 1.1 on the next page.

To make this distinction between micro and macro levels clearer, let’s return to the example of the homeless, with which we opened this chapter. To study homeless people, symbolic interactionists would focus on the micro level. They would analyze what homeless people do when they are in shelters and on the streets. They would also analyze their communications, both their talk and their nonverbal interaction (gestures, silence, use of space, and so on). The observations I made at the beginning of this chapter about the silence in the homeless shelter, for example, would be of interest to symbolic interactionists.
This micro level, however, would not interest functionalists and conflict theorists. They would focus instead on the macro level. Functionalists would examine how changes in the parts of society have increased homelessness. They might look at how changes in the family (fewer children, more divorce) and economic conditions (inflation, fewer unskilled jobs, loss of jobs to workers overseas) cause homelessness among people who are unable to find jobs and who have no family to fall back on. For their part, conflict theorists would stress the struggle between social classes. They would be especially interested in how decisions by international elites on global production and trade affect the local job market, and along with it unemployment and homelessness.

**Putting the Theoretical Perspectives Together**

Which theoretical perspective should we use to study human behavior? Which level of analysis is the correct one? As you have seen, these three perspectives produce contrasting pictures of social life. In the case of divorce, these interpretations are quite different from the commonsense understanding that two people are simply “incompatible.” Because each theory focuses on different features of social life, each provides a distinct interpretation. Consequently, we need to use all three theoretical lenses to analyze human behavior. By combining the contributions of each, we gain a more comprehensive picture of social life.

**Trends Shaping the Future of Sociology**

Two major trends indicate changing directions in sociology. Let’s look again at the relationship of sociology to social reform, and then at globalization.

**Sociology Full Circle: Reform Versus Research**

**Three Stages in Sociology.** As you have seen, a tension between social reform and social analysis runs through the history of sociology. To better understand this tension, we
can divide sociology into three time periods (Lazarsfeld and Reitz 1989). During the *first* phase, which lasted until the 1920s, the primary purpose of research was to improve society. During the *second* phase, from the 1920s until World War II, the initial concern with improving society switched to developing abstract knowledge. We are now in a *third* phase, which began around the end of World War II, in which sociologists are increasingly seeking ways to apply their research findings. Many sociology departments offer courses in applied sociology, with some offering internships in applied sociology at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

**Diversity of Orientations.** I want to stress that sociology is filled with diverse opinions. Sociologists do not move in lockstep toward a single goal. To divide sociology into three separate phases overlooks as much as it reveals. Even during the first phase, Durkheim and Weber did research for the purpose of gaining academic respectability for sociology. Similarly, during the second phase, many sociologists who wanted to reform society chafed at the emphasis on understanding. And today, many sociologists want the emphasis to remain on basic sociology. Some do not even acknowledge that applied sociology is “real” sociology. They say that it is actually social work or psychology masquerading as sociology.

Each particular period, however, does have basic emphases, and this division of sociology into three phases pinpoints major trends. The tension that has run through sociology—between gaining knowledge and applying knowledge—will continue. During this current phase, the pendulum is swinging toward applying sociological knowledge.

**Public Sociology.** The American Sociological Association (ASA) is promoting *public sociology.* By this term, the ASA refers to sociology being used for the public good. One goal of public sociology is to have politicians and policy makers use the sociological perspective as they decide social policy. In the Cultural Diversity box on the next page, you can see that basic research can also lead to public sociology.

**Globalization**

A second major trend, globalization, is also leaving its mark on sociology. *Globalization* is the breaking down of national boundaries because of advances in communications, trade, and travel. Because the United States dominates sociology and we U.S. sociologists tend to concentrate on events and relationships that occur in our own country, most of our findings are based on U.S. samples. Globalization is destined to broaden our horizons, directing us to a greater consideration of global issues. This, in turn, is likely to motivate us to try more vigorously to identify universal principles.

**Application of Globalization to This Text.** You and I are living at a great historical moment, something that isn’t always easy to do. We are personally experiencing globalization, one of the most significant events in all of world history. This process is shaping our lives, our hopes, and our future—sometimes even twisting them. As globalization shrinks the globe, that is, as people around the world become more interconnected within the same global village, our own welfare is increasingly tied to that of people in other nations. From time to time in the following pages, we will also explore how the *globalization of capitalism*—capitalism becoming the world’s dominant economic system—is also having profound effects on our lives. Your will also confront the developing *new world order,* which, if it can shave off its rough edges, also appears destined to play a significant role in your future.

To help broaden your horizons, in the following chapters you will visit many cultures around the world, looking at what life is like for the people who live in those cultures. Seeing how their society affects their behavior and orientations to life helps us to understand how our society influences what we do and how we feel about life. This, of course, takes us to one of the main goals of this book.
Unanticipated Public Sociology: Studying Job Discrimination

Basic sociology—research aimed at learning more about some behavior—can turn into public sociology. Here is what happened to Devah Pager, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, who was doing volunteer work in a homeless shelter. Some of the men told her how hard it was to find work if they had had been in prison. Were the men exaggerating? she wondered. To find out what difference a prison record makes in getting a job, she sent pairs of college men to apply for 350 entry-level jobs in Milwaukee. One team was African American, and one was white. Pager prepared identical résumés for the teams, but with one difference: On each team, one of the men said he had served 18 months in prison for possession of cocaine.

Figure 1.5 shows the difference that the prison record made. Men without a prison record were two or three times as likely to be called back. But Pager came up with another significant finding. Look at the difference that race–ethnicity made. White men with a prison record were more likely to be offered a job than African American men who had a clean record!

Sociological research often remains in obscure journals, read by only a few specialists. But Pager’s findings got around, turning basic research into public sociology. Someone told President George W. Bush about the research, and he announced in his State of the Union speech that he wanted Congress to fund a $300 million program to provide mentoring and other support to help former prisoners get jobs (Kroeger 2004). As you can see, sometimes only a thin line separates basic and public sociology.

For Your Consideration
What findings would you expect if women had been included in this study?
Origins of Sociology

When did sociology first appear as a separate discipline?
Sociology emerged as a separate discipline in the mid-1800s in western Europe, during the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Industrialization affected all aspects of human existence—where people lived, the nature of their work, their relationships, and how they viewed life. Early sociologists who focused on these social changes include Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Harriet Martineau, and W. E. B. Du Bois. P. 8–14.

Values in Sociological Research

Should the purpose of social research be only to advance human understanding or also to reform society?
Sociologists agree that research should be objective, that is, that the researcher’s values and beliefs should not influence conclusions. But sociologists do not agree on the uses and purposes of social research. Some say that its purpose should be only to advance understanding of human behavior; others, that its goal should be to reform harmful social arrangements. Pp. 14–15.

Verstehen and Social Facts

How do sociologists use verstehen and social facts to study human behavior?
According to Weber, to understand why people act as they do, sociologists must try to put themselves in their shoes. He used the German verb *Verstehen*, “to grasp by insight,” to describe this essentially subjective approach. Although not denying the importance of *Verstehen*, Emile Durkheim emphasized the importance of uncovering social facts, social conditions that influence how people behave. Contemporary sociologists use both approaches to understand human behavior. P. 16.

Sociology in North America

When were the first academic departments of sociology established in the United States?
The earliest departments of sociology were established in the late 1800s at the universities of Kansas, Chicago, and Atlanta. In sociology’s early years, the contributions of women and minorities were largely ignored. P. 16.

What was the position of women and minorities in early sociology?
Sociology developed during a historical period of deep sexism and racism. The few women, such as Harriet Martineau, and minorities, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, who received the education necessary to become sociologists felt the sting of discrimination. Pp. 16–21.

What is the difference between basic (or pure) and applied sociology?
Basic (or pure) sociology is sociological research whose purpose is to make discoveries. In contrast, applied sociology is the use of sociology to solve problems. Pp. 21–23.

Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology

What is a theory?
A theory is a general statement about how facts are related to one another. A theory provides a conceptual framework for interpreting facts. Pp. 23.

What are sociology’s major theoretical perspectives?
Sociologists use three primary theoretical frameworks to interpret social life. Symbolic interactionists examine how people use symbols to develop and share their views of the world. Symbolic interactionists usually focus on the micro level—on small-scale, face-to-face interaction. Functionalists, in contrast, focus on the macro level—on large-scale patterns of society. They stress that a social system is made up of interrelated parts. When working properly, each part fulfills a function that contributes to the system’s stability. Conflict theorists also focus on large-scale patterns of society. They stress that society is composed of competing groups that struggle for scarce resources.

With each perspective focusing on select features of social life and each providing a unique interpretation, no single theory is adequate. The combined insights of all three perspectives yield a more comprehensive picture of social life. Pp. 23–29.

Trends Shaping the Future of Sociology

What trends are likely to have an impact on sociology?
Sociology has gone through three phases: The first was an emphasis on reforming society; the second had its focus on basic sociology; the third, today’s phase, is taking us closer to our roots of applying sociology to social change. Public sociology is the most recent example of this change. A second major trend, globalization, is likely to broaden sociological horizons, refocusing research and theory away from its concentration on U.S. society. Pp. 29–31.
THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT Chapter 1

1. Do you think that sociologists should try to reform society or to study it dispassionately?
2. Of the three theoretical perspectives, which one would you prefer to use if you were a sociologist? Why?
3. Considering the macro- and micro-level approaches in sociology, which one do you think better explains social life? Why?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

What can you find in MySocLab? • Complete Ebook • Practice Tests and Video and Audio activities • Mapping and Data Analysis exercises

Where Can I Read More on This Topic? Suggested readings for this chapter are listed at the back of this book.

www.mysoclab.com • Sociology in the News • Classic Readings in Sociology • Research and Writing advice