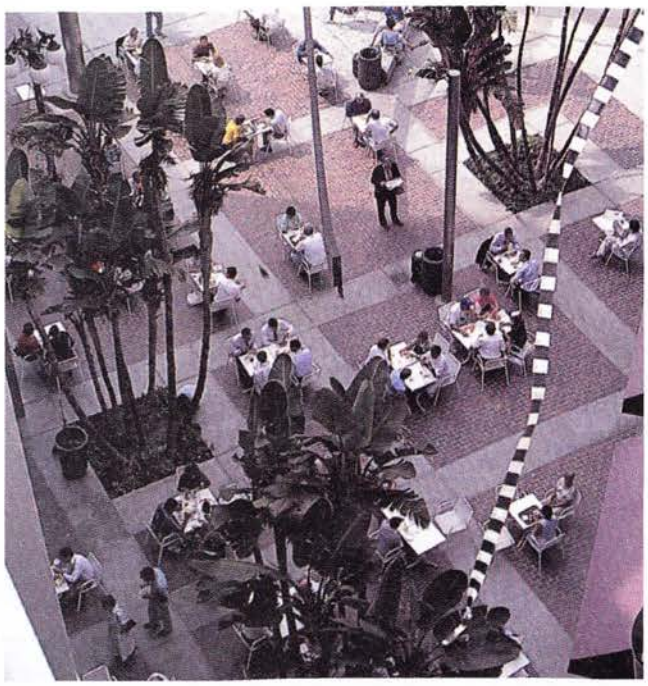
This is not an easy world to live in, much less to understand. There probably has never been a time in human history with such widespread day-to-day awareness of the crises and problems that arise from social life. From the news to films to life in our neighborhoods, there is no escaping at least some sense that the world is huge and interconnected and a place of much trouble. In the United States alone, we have seen homelessness of unprecedented proportions, a full-fledged AIDS epidemic, the increasing poisoning of ground, air, and water with garbage and toxic wastes, a weakened economy, a widening gap between rich and poor, and continuing evidence that there has been little progress toward racial or gender equality in spite of decades of social activism. To these we must add problems that extend beyond our borders, from the international drug trade and genocide in Bosnia and Rawanda to a destabilized world economy.

In the face of all this, it is understandable that many people do not even try to make sense of the world. It is a world that was already here when we were born into it, a world that we did not make and that, we often think, we cannot change. The world is enormously complex and seems to change faster than we can grasp it. For all of our collective awareness of the events and problems of our times, we really do not know what to do with it, except, perhaps, to attribute the problems in some vague way to society or the flawed personalities of people in general or our leaders in particular. In the end, our days often seem easier if we do not read the newspapers, if we turn off the news and try to go about our personal lives.

Our personal lives, though, are no less complicated. In the midst of all the world's problems we wrestle with what we tend to think of as personal troubles: how we appear to other people; being accepted, liked, and loved; having sexual relationships without giving up safety; figuring out who we are and reconciling that with who we want to be; getting along with (and without) our parents; earning a living; deciding whether to marry, to have children, to divorce.

What we tend to miss is the fact that our personal lives are not truly personal. We are not alone in our troubles, which is precisely the point of this book: Everything *is* connected to everything else, and we are inevitably a part of that. We all participate in a social environment that presents us with both the troubles we must struggle with and the resources that are available to us. Each of us has characteristics of gender, race, age, religion, ethnicity, and social class in a society in which these matter a great deal in what happens to us. Our emotional needs are strongly influenced by the social relationships we participate in. The conditions under which we can earn a living depend on the fact that we live in an industrial capitalist society. The food we eat, the water we drink, the clothes we wear, the books we read, the toxic chemicals that make their way into our bodies—all depend on the social environment we live in. Virtually every aspect of our lives connects us to a larger world that most of us barely begin to understand.

Although none of us made this world, as participants in it, we do affect it. The social world is not frozen; it is a process of continual making and remaking in which we take part; and we can choose to participate in that process with as much awareness and understanding of it as we can achieve. At the very least



Just as there are patterns among stars, so too are there patterns in relationships among people. In the photo of people on a patio, few tables have an odd number of people. How would you explain this simple pattern? What does it say about life in our society?

this makes life more interesting and meaningful, for, by appreciating the complexity of the world and our connections to it, we also appreciate the richness of our own lives. At the most, this commitment can help change the world itself, including the terms by which we live.

The purpose of this book is quite simple: to offer you the sociological framework as a set of tools for making sense of the social world and understanding your own life by seeing more clearly its connection with the lives of others in a shared social environment.

A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF FAMILIAR WORLDS

Sociology helps us see the human arrangements of shared ideas and relationships that connect our otherwise separate lives, just as astronomy helps us see constellations where before we saw only a sea of individual stars. The stars were there all the time, but to see Orion's Belt or the Big Dipper, we have to look for patterns; and to see the constellations of relationships that characterize social life, we have to pay attention to the patterns that exist among individuals, groups, and societies. In the remainder of this chapter we will use examples to introduce major concepts that organize sociological thinking as a way of looking at the world and trying to make sense of it.

Social Expectations: How Do We Know Who People Really Are?

Perhaps it was just this morning that you entered your first class of the new term, most likely a large room with rows of chairs facing the front of the room. As students talked among themselves, a person—perhaps it was a woman—entered the room, walked to the front, and stood behind the lectern. Soon after she arrived, everyone in the room stopped talking—except for her. When she wanted to talk, she just talked; when others wanted to talk, they raised a hand and waited for her permission. Students asked questions; she made statements. She did not write down what you said, but you wrote down what she said.

This scene repeats itself so often in college classrooms that it may never have occurred to you how remarkable it is that no one ever asks those people behind lecterns if they are who we think they are. Without any personal knowledge of the professor in the scene just described, students pay attention to her and enter into relationships in which she has power over them and controls rewards they value highly.

Students do have some "knowledge" about her, however, knowledge that they substitute for details of her personal identity. They know that according to the catalog the course was supposed to meet in that room at that time, and that every student was expected to read the catalog and be guided by it. They went to the room at the designated time and found other people there. Some asked, "Is this Intro Soc.?" They were told yes and believed what they heard. The woman entered the room and took the position at the front. Anyone could have stood there, but only she did. This is important, for if anyone had challenged her for that spot, your knowledge of who she was might have been shaken. No one challenged her, however, because someone was *expected* to occupy that position, someone who looked as though she was supposed to be there.

You expected her to be older than you (unless you are a nontraditional student), to dress in a certain way, to speak English, and to behave appropriately. So long as people's appearance and behavior fit our expectations, we treat them accordingly, even though they might not "really" be what they appear to be. The acceptance of a teacher's authority in a classroom depends less on the personalities of the individuals than on expectations that students and teachers share about one another as students and teachers.

One point of this is that we often enter into relationships with people without any direct personal knowledge of who they are. We take our clothes off in front of people we believe to be physicians, and we might even allow them to perform surgery on us. We allow airline pilots to take our lives in their hands. Rarely, if ever, do we ask doctors for their credentials or demand assurance that a pilot really knows how to fly a plane.

What we know of one another consists primarily of expectations about people's positions in social relationships (professor, doctor) and about ourselves in relation to them (student, patient). The power of those expectations comes in part from the fact that we share them with one another and in part from our general lack of awareness of them as characteristics of a social environment. Rarely are we conscious of the complex relationships that tie us to one another, and, as a result, we often try to understand who we and others are solely by focusing on characteristics such as personality.

In most social situations we are unaware of how many expectations we have until someone violates them, as Robin Williams' character, Mr. Keating, does so effectively in the film Dead Poet's Society.

In 1987, four New Jersey teenagers committed suicide by locking themselves in a garage and sitting in a car with the engine running. As the facial expressions on these teenage mourners show, making sense of why someone close to us might commit suicide is a haunting and difficult thing. For sociology, the problem is less personal but no less compelling: Why would rates of suicide for young people increase in a society? What social forces are at work, and what can be done to change them?

Perspectives: How Did They Come to Die?

Sociologists pay attention not only to relationships between individuals, but also to the social context in which those relationships exist. More than anything else, this focus distinguishes sociology as a point of view, as we will see in trying to understand what happened to four New Jersey teenagers in 1987.

One spring evening, Thomas Olton, a Bergenfield, New Jersey 18-year-old, left home in his Chevy Camaro and picked up his three best friends—Thomas Rizzo, 19, Cheryl Burress, 17, and her sister Lisa, 16. They drove around town for most of the night, stopping at a gas station to buy $3 worth of gas and to try, unsuccessfully, to steal the long rubber hose attached to the gas station's vacuum cleaner. Sometime early that morning, they parked the car in the garage of an apartment complex in this middle-class suburb of New York City, closed the garage door, and sat with the engine running and windows open. Several hours later, a man on his way to work found them dead from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Figuring out how and why these four people committed suicide is not simple. Since we can look at things from different perspectives, we can ask various questions about the same thing and arrive at different explanations. Perspectives influence what we look at and what we make of what we observe. It is fairly simple to explain these deaths from the perspectives of biology, chemistry, and physics—the points of view coroners use to determine the cause of death. These perspectives raise questions about what happens when gasoline is burned in internal combustion engines, how carbon monoxide accumulates in a closed space, and how it combines with hemoglobin in the blood to deprive the brain and other vital organs of oxygen.

To these questions we can add psychological ones about human choice and the emotional and mental processes that influence what we choose, about *why* these young people chose to kill themselves. According to family, friends, and teachers, the four had been despondent over the deaths of several friends during the previous year, had troubles with school and work, and had many family problems, including divorced parents, poor relations with stepparents,

and, for two of them, fathers who had died in tragic circumstances—one shot himself, and the other overdosed on drugs. Rizzo and Olton both had drinking problems and were drunk at the time of their deaths. All four had taken cocaine.

Many concluded afterward that their mental states matched those known to make people susceptible to suicide—feelings of depression, despair, helplessness, and hopelessness, and an inability to cope with life, to which we can add the disinhibiting effects of cocaine and alcohol (see Lester 1983). Many people have such feelings, however, without committing suicide, which means that such an explanation is not a full solution to the psychological puzzle. We would still want to know why some people in such states kill themselves while others do not.

Even a complete physical and psychological explanation falls short, for it looks only at individuals' processes and characteristics. The four teenagers made their choices within a society, and to understand their deaths from a sociological perspective we must understand that society and their participation in it.

From U.S. suicide rates, we know that young people 15 to 24 years old are 10 percent more likely to commit suicide than are members of the population as a whole (USCB 1994). We should qualify this general comparison, however, in two ways. First, it was not always so: in 1950 the young adult suicide rate was less than *half* that of the general population. Since then, however, the suicide rate for 15- to 24-year-olds has almost *tripled*, while the rate for the population as a whole has remained virtually unchanged. This means that while the suicide rate for the young has grown rapidly, the rate for older people has actually declined. While suicide rates tell us only about categories of people and not about individuals, they do give us clues about the pressures exerted on people who occupy similar social positions and have similar social characteristics and the resulting patterns of behavior. Over the past forty years, the United States has changed in ways that make young people dramatically more likely to commit suicide, and, from a sociological perspective, only by understanding such changes in social systems can we fully understand the different kinds of choices that individuals tend to make.

Second, while the overall suicide rate for 15- to 24-year-olds is higher than the national rate for the population as a whole, this is due primarily to the much higher rate among white males and, to a much lesser degree, black males. Compared with others of the same age, young white males are almost twice as likely as black males to kill themselves, four times more likely than white females, and eight times more likely than black females. As a form of behavior, suicide is strongly connected with being white and male (USCB 1994).

These four suicides, then, are part of a behavior pattern that varies historically and with characteristics such as age, race, and gender (see One Step Further 1.1). To understand what these four teenagers did that morning, it is not enough to know their state of mind; we also have to know how that was linked to their social environment. If people are more likely to kill themselves when they feel helpless and hopeless and alone, then we have to ask how social systems promote or discourage such factors. Helplessness and hopelessness, attachment and alienation, meaning and meaninglessness all have to do primarily with our involvement with other people. In his classic study of suicide, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim ([1897] 1951) argued that suicide is most likely when the social ties that bind people to one another are too weak or, in the case of sacrificing ourselves in the interests of the group, too strong. The strength of such bonds is not an aspect of our personalities; it is an aspect of social systems and our *relationship* to them. A society in which people have little effect on what happens to them and lack socially valued roles to perform, and in which their major connection to others is weak and unstable, is, sociologically, a society that contributes to a relatively high suicide rate.

ONE STEP FURTHER 1.1

Age, Gender, Suicide, and a Little Bit of History

This is the first of the One Step Further boxes that you will find throughout *Human Arrangements*. Each takes a point made in the text and explores it in more detail with the kinds of data sociologists use to test ideas about social life. If you feel uncomfortable with charts, graphs, and tables, just take your time and read along with the explanation that accompanies each box. There is nothing here that requires any statistical sophistication.

In October 1929, the U.S. stock market crashed, plunging the United States and much of the world into a decade of severe economic depression. Thousands of people had been speculating in the market in the hope of making a quick fortune, and many lost everything in the crash. To illustrate how people's social characteristics affect their response to such events, consider the following information about variations in suicide rates during this difficult period in history.

The graph in figure A shows how suicide rates for whites changed between the years 1925 and 1939, a period that included the stock market crash. The years are marked off along the horizontal axis, and the suicide rates are marked off along the vertical axis. There are seven lines showing the experiences of categories of white people who differ by gender or age. Each line is marked with a description at the right and a Roman numeral at the left. The top line (VII) shows suicide rates for 65- to 74-year-old white men; the bottom line (I) shows suicide rates for 25- to 34-year-old white women. Stop for a moment and make sure you see in the graph everything we've just described.

Beginning at the bottom (line I), you can see that suicide rates for younger white women changed barely at all from 1925 to 1939—the line is almost straight across. The same is true for white women 55 to 64 (line II). In addition, notice that the lines for older and younger women are quite close to each other, showing that older women were not much more likely to kill themselves than were younger women.

The situation for white men, however, is dramatically different. First notice that for each year, with each older age group, there is a large jump in the suicide rate, which you can see from the fact that the lines for older age groups are located quite a ways above the lines for younger age groups. In 1932 the suicide rate for white men was 23 per 100,000 for those 25 to 34, 36 for those 35 to 44, 62 for those 45 to 54, 86 for those 55 to 64, and 92 for those 65 to 74 (see the small circles on each line). This is a pattern that still holds in the United States. Why should older men be so much more likely to kill themselves? Is it because they have a more difficult time adjusting to the inevitable disappointments that occur as we age? What do you think?

Now notice how the shape of the lines changes as we move from younger men to older men. The suicide rate for the youngest men (line III) increased only slightly by 1932, but as we move upward to each older age group, the jump is more and more pronounced. For the oldest men (line VII), the rate jumped from 63 per 100,000 in 1925 to 92 in 1932 and then fell back down to its previous level over the next three or four years. Notice also how different the line for 55- to 64-year-old men (line VI) is from the line for 55- to 64-year-old women (line II).

Stop for a moment and make sure you see these patterns.

Differences in gender and age go along with sharply different tendencies to commit suicide. Why these patterns exist is still an unsolved puzzle, but they raise intriguing questions about age and gender as social characteristics that affect our behavior.

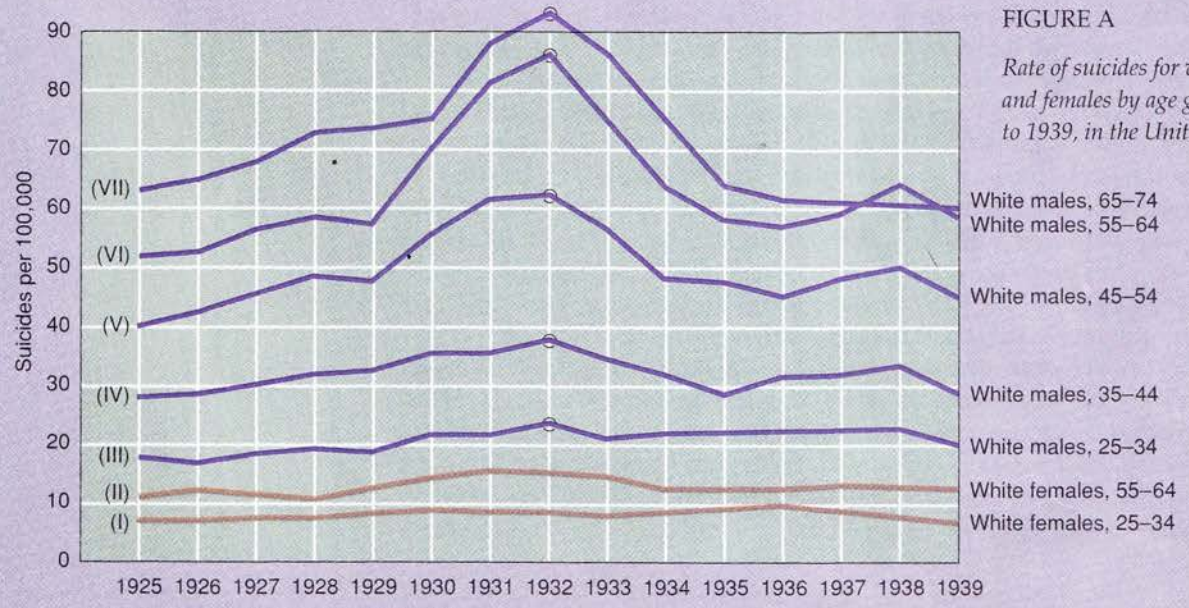


FIGURE A

Rate of suicides for white males and females by age group, 1925 to 1939, in the United States.

SOURCE: National Office of Vital Statistics (NOHS), 1956.

In this light, it is easier to see why increasing numbers of young adults choose suicide in response to personal troubles. Families tend to be unstable because of high divorce rates, the tensions that come when both parents must work, and the difficulties of forming new families when divorced parents remarry. Teenagers have few socially valued roles to perform, and therefore they lack a secure place in their communities. They confront competition in school and must look forward to an unstable economy in which earning a living seems difficult for any but the most privileged. They live in a society in which pain and suffering are not accepted as parts of life, but are viewed as intolerable conditions that must be relieved at all costs, especially through the use of drugs, alcohol, and consumerism. Add to all of this that most young people have not yet developed fully the personal resources to deal effectively with uncertainty and stress, and suicide is easier to understand.

What is most important to realize here is that when we pay attention to patterns of behavior in relation to societies and people's positions in them, we gain insights that other perspectives overlook. As valuable as it is to identify the psychological aspects of suicide, we also need to appreciate the social circumstances affecting the emotional and mental processes through which people make choices. These acts of suicide tell us things about these four people; but they also mirror characteristics of the society in which they participated. Their act is connected to a collective process unfolding through history, and by locating them in that process we come to a fuller sociological understanding of their individual circumstances, experience, and behavior.

WHAT SOCIOLOGY IS ALL ABOUT

Sociology is the systematic study of social life and behavior, especially in relation to social systems—how they work, how they change, the consequences they produce, and their complex relation to people's lives. The concept of a system is widely used in the physical and social sciences as well as in such diverse fields as philosophy and linguistics. In general, a system is a set of elements or parts, related to one another through some kind of interdependency, that can be thought of as a whole. Biologists, for example, think in terms of living organisms as systems consisting of interrelated parts, such as the circulatory, nervous, and digestive systems, and linguists speak of language as a system whose elements—words and punctuation marks—are linked by rules of syntax and grammar.

A **social system** is also a set of interrelated elements that can be thought of as a whole. It can be as large and complex as a society or as small and relatively simple as a married couple. The parts that comprise social systems are of many different types. They include the positions that people occupy in social relationships: In many societies, for example, a marriage consists of a wife and husband, while in others it may include multiple husbands or wives. On a larger scale, an army's elements range from the positions soldiers occupy with their different ranks and duties to collections of soldiers such as platoons and battalions.

Social systems also include elements as varied as language, beliefs, values, laws, and other rules of behavior; music, art, dance, poetry, drama, literature, and other forms of knowledge; and physical products such as houses, computers, and the paper on which these words are printed. As a social system, for example, a university includes teachers, students, and administrators, and physical elements such as libraries, laboratories, dorms, classrooms, theaters,

Overview

The examples in this chapter center on vital aspects of social systems that form the core of sociology. To understand social systems and what they have to do with our individual lives, we need ways to describe the characteristics that distinguish one system from another. To do this we focus on several key aspects of social life—cultural, structural, and population/ecological—that define sociology as a perspective.

As you read the brief introduction to culture, social structure, and population/ecology in the remaining sections of this chapter, do not be too concerned with technical definitions of new terms—there will be plenty of time for that in chapters 2 through 4, where each is covered in detail. Instead, concentrate on the overall idea of a sociological perspective that focuses on these different aspects of social systems and social life.

and athletic facilities. It also includes less tangible elements, such as ideas about the value of higher education, the different ways of discovering truth, and the right of people to express unpopular opinions. All of these are part of what we think of as a university.

There is much more to a social system than a collection of parts, however, for the parts are connected to one another through interdependency. In the simplest sense, for example, the social positions we occupy are interdependent—each exists only in relation to the others. There is no mother without a child, just as there is no teacher without a student, and positions in social systems are related through the expectations attached to them. The expectation that spouses will have sex only with each other, for example, is not simply an idea shared by individual wives and husbands. Sociologically it is part of what connects wife and husband as positions in the social system known as marriage.

The basic characteristics of social systems apply no matter how large or small, simple or complex, the system is. The world economy is about as unlike a marriage as one can imagine, but it too is a social system. Its elements include corporations, nations, and international arrangements such as the European Community. These in turn are connected to one another through relationships involving trade, investment, political cooperation and conflict, and inequalities of wealth and power. At the heart of these relationships are expectations such as those embodied in international law and trade agreements, as well as ideas about what a contract is and the rights to own property and make a profit.

In using the concept of a social system, remember that social life takes place in ways far less rigid, organized, and predictable than the word *system* might imply. Social systems are not like biological organisms, whose parts work together smoothly and harmoniously in the interest of furthering the life of the organism as a whole. Although there is a degree of harmony, cooperation, and common purpose in social systems, there also can be conflict. Exploitation and oppression, revolution, jealousy, greed, revenge, fear, and competition are easy to find in social systems; but there is little that corresponds to these in other kinds of systems, such as the human body or language.

Perhaps the most important aspect of social systems is that they are more than the sum of their parts (see Durkheim [1895] 1938). A human body is more than a collection of cells and organs; it is the particular *arrangement* of cells and organs in relation to one another that distinguishes humans from other species. In the same way, a group is more than a collection of specific people; it is a particular arrangement of individuals in relation to one another. If you were asked to define a basketball team, it would not be enough to simply list the names of the people on a particular team. Instead, you would have to describe the relationships and expectations that bind people together in particular ways that distinguish a basketball team from, for instance, a group of office workers (both of which groups might include the same individuals).

Groups and Societies

Perhaps no two words are more often associated with sociology than *group* and *society* are. There is good reason for this, for although sociologists are interested in many social systems that are neither groups nor societies, these two are nonetheless central.

A **group** is a particular kind of social system in which people interact in regular patterned ways and share a sense of being identified as members of the group. Groups are a basic unit of sociological analysis because we spend so much of our lives in them and because they are important sources of both social control and social conflict. In addition, the characteristics of groups affect not only individuals,

but also larger social systems of which they are parts. Relationships within families, for example, affect not only the health and welfare of their members, but also the ability of societies to teach children how to participate in social life.

A **society** is a social system that shares a geographical territory, a common culture, and way of life. It is held together by a shared identity and is relatively independent and self-sufficient. Because of the central place of societies in social life, sociology has a great deal to say about how societies are put together and how they operate—as you will see in the chapters to come.

Societies differ greatly from one another. They may differ in how homogeneous they are. In Iceland, for example, most people trace their heritage back hundreds of years to common roots in Norway. In contrast, the U.S. population includes many ethnic and racial categories whose members often go to great lengths to preserve their language, values, and distinctive clothing, food, and customs. As we will see, this heterogeneity is a source of rich diversity but also of prejudice, discrimination, and social conflict.

Societies also differ in their degree of independence and self-sufficiency, especially in a world in which international trade and politics are as important as they are now. Japan is an independent nation free from political control by other countries. By comparison, Tibet has a distinct way of life and territory, but is under the military and political control of China. In other cases, dependence takes more subtle forms. Countries such as South Korea, El Salvador, and Panama have been so dependent on U.S. aid that the United States has been able to exert considerable pressure on the internal affairs of these countries.

Societies can be very large (the territory of the former Soviet Union was more than twice that of the United States, and the people of China make up a fifth of the entire world population) or very small (Iceland's entire population amounts to barely 300,000 people, one-fifth the population of Kansas City). They vary enormously in their complexity, from modern industrial societies in which many aspects of life are affected by huge bureaucracies to relatively simple societies with no schools, government, military, corporations, banks, or churches.

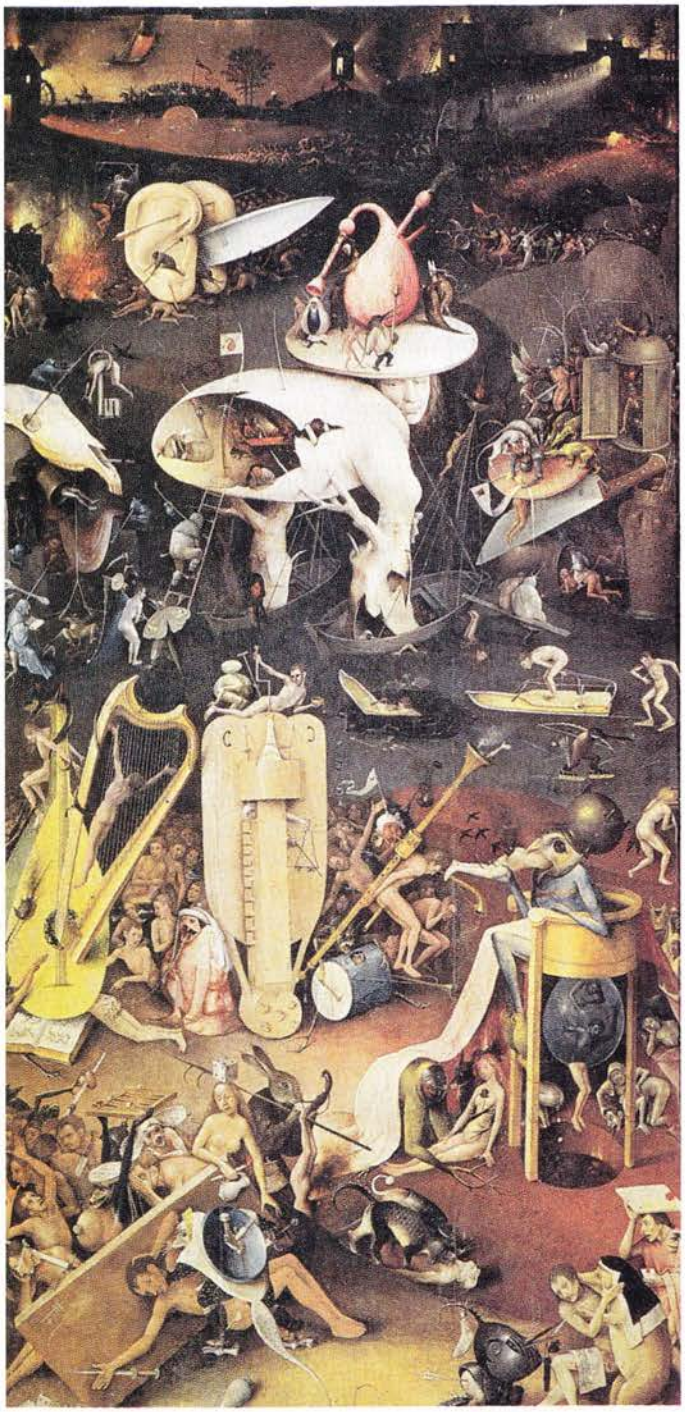
Perhaps the most important difference among societies centers on their ability to obtain material needs—how they arrange themselves to produce goods, to grow food, and meet other physical needs. At one extreme, hunter-gatherers grow none of their own food and have few possessions, while, at the other extreme, industrial societies grow all of their own food and place a high value on accumulating possessions. Many important aspects of life in a society—from the existence of inequality and social oppression to various forms of religious beliefs—are related to these productive arrangements.

However large or small, simple or complex, a social system is, it can be described in terms of its cultural, structural, and population/ecological characteristics.

Culture

At the core of every social system is a **culture** consisting primarily of shared ideas that guide what people perceive, think, feel, and do. What goes on in college classrooms, for example, is affected by a variety of shared beliefs—that teachers know more than students, that papers, exams, and grades are valid ways of measuring knowledge and intellectual ability, and so on. Some of these ideas take the form of rules about how people are supposed to appear and behave—students who cheat should expect to be punished if they are caught, as should teachers who sexually harass students or come to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Everyone is expected to conform to certain standards of dress, to use the same language, to arrive on time, and to refrain from behavior that is defined as inappropriate—from taking off one's clothes to shouting down people because we dislike their ideas.

Cultural beliefs are used to construct basic ideas about reality, especially aspects we cannot observe, such as what happens after death. Bosch's sixteenth-century vision of hell is a cultural attempt to grasp the unknown.



Those who participate in social systems also share ideas about what is important or desirable. Colleges place a high value on education itself, for example, as well as what it takes to become educated—including speaking up in class and being honest. In many cases, such ideas have emotions attached to them, such as the respect that students may feel for their professors (reflected in the practice of addressing them by formal titles such as *professor*) or the feelings of intense loyalty that students often feel toward their school.

While ideas constitute a major part of culture, social systems also include material objects that affect virtually every aspect of social life, from how

and what we eat to how we communicate, plan communities, and deal with conflict. The scale of higher education in industrial societies, for example, would be impossible without the resources provided in the form of material culture. The material culture of college classrooms is rich and varied, from the classroom itself to blackboards, desks, computers, projectors, and test tubes.

In both its material and nonmaterial forms, culture is an enormously important part of social systems, because it is largely through culture that humans create the world they live in. Culture provides the means for creating a sense of what is real and enables human communities to adapt to and affect one another and their surroundings. It is the ultimate source of all the ways of thinking about and making sense of the world—from the simplest uses of language to describe something, to the theorizing of science, to the depths of religious belief. In its physical forms, it is literally the stuff of which humans make their material world, from books and eating utensils to homes and highways to weapons of war. To understand how social systems operate, then, it is essential that we understand their cultures.

Social Structure

The concept of **social structure** is used to describe social systems in two different ways. In the first sense, structure refers to the relationships that connect different parts of a system to one another. On the micro—or small-scale—level, of social life, structure is the arrangement of people in relation to one another and the patterns of expectation attached to each position in those relationships. When we identify ourselves as children in relation to our mothers and fathers, for example, we define an important part of the structure of family systems. On the macro—or large-scale—level, groups, organizations, and societies interact with one another through patterns of shared expectations. For instance, universities have structured relationships with their communities, other universities, government agencies, and corporations.

The concept of social structure also refers to the distribution of people among various social positions as well as the distribution of major rewards and resources of social life, such as wealth, power, and prestige, among members of a group or society. The medical profession in the United States is structured so that women rarely occupy the social position of surgeon and, as a result, are denied the high income, prestige, and influence that go with it.

The concept of social structure describes how we are arranged in relation to one another, in everything from personal interactions to society as a whole. As a concept, it is extremely useful, because it draws our attention to the distributions and patterns of expectation that characterize social life.

As important as culture and structure are, we cannot overlook the fact that social systems exist in *physical* environments, which brings us to the third major area in the sociological perspective—population and ecology.

Population and Ecology

The concepts of population and ecology focus on people as organisms who live in relation to physical environments. In sociology, a **population** is a collection of people who share a physical environment. It can be as small as a single person living on a desert island or as large as the population of the world, which numbered in excess of 5 billion people in 1995.

Ecology focuses on the characteristics of physical environments and the relation of populations to them. Characteristics include the availability of

resources such as fertile land, water, and fuel; access to transportation routes such as rivers; and isolation by mountains, deserts, or other barriers. The relation of populations to physical environments includes such factors as how large populations are, how rapidly they grow or shrink, and how they are distributed in physical space. This relation also includes cultural technology, a population's ability to make use of natural resources. Plows, electric generators, and computers all represent human ways to make use of the physical environment.

Population and ecology are important because physical conditions affect how social systems develop, and social systems, in turn, profoundly affect physical environments. While the concepts of culture and structure define the social environment, population and ecology focus on humanity as a species of life whose numbers shrink and swell, distribute themselves geographically, and learn to use their physical environments—all of which affects social life.

What Do We Want to Know?

We have said that sociology is about social life and behavior, especially in relation to social systems—but *what* about all of this do we want to know? As you will see in the chapters ahead, as sociologists look at the cultural, structural, and population/ecological characteristics of social systems, we pose four basic questions: How is social life organized? What consequences does this produce? How does it change? And what does it have to do with the lives of individuals?

Social Life and Its Consequences As the study of marriage and the family makes clear, social systems can be organized in many different ways. Depending on the society, for example, people have varying degrees of freedom to choose their own spouses, and marry for reasons ranging from romantic love to political gain. Families also vary in how responsibilities and power are distributed, in the number of spouses people may have, and in the rules that govern how marriages may be dissolved.

We need to understand how social life is organized, because this organization produces an astounding variety of consequences—from family violence to whether nations go to war, from poverty and wealth to art and rock music, from religion to revolution, from air pollution to designer jeans, from democracy to slavery. In the simplest sense, the organization of social life promotes patterns of thought, feeling, appearance, and behavior. Families, for example, have patterns of interaction through which family members express deep feelings and involve themselves in almost every aspect of one another's lives. Paradoxically, this can also include abuse and violence, forms of behavior that seem out of place in the family, which we tend to think of as a source of safety and caring. In search of a sociological understanding of this, we find, among other things, that violence is more likely in families with an unequal distribution of power, especially when husbands dominate. Looking deeper, however, we also find that the characteristics of families that contribute to the intimacy and emotional support we value so highly—such as privacy, being together a lot, and depending on one another—can also create the potential for violence and abuse. This is particularly true when external conditions related to family life—such as high unemployment rates—increase stress and strain, and, with it, the likelihood that people will strike out at those nearest to them (see Gartner 1990).

One of the most important things to understand about the consequences of social life is that people are affected differently, depending on the positions they occupy in social systems. This is especially true of the unequal

distribution of wealth, income, and power. A tiny percentage of U.S. families control the vast majority of income and wealth; black and Hispanic families have far less than whites and are far more likely to live in poverty; women earn far less than men do; and children are more likely to be poor than are people in other categories. On a world scale, a small elite of industrial nations controls the vast majority of the world's wealth, technology, and military power. The consequences of social inequality are varied, profound, and deeply felt, ranging from inadequate health care and high infant mortality among poor people to international warfare over control of natural resources such as oil.

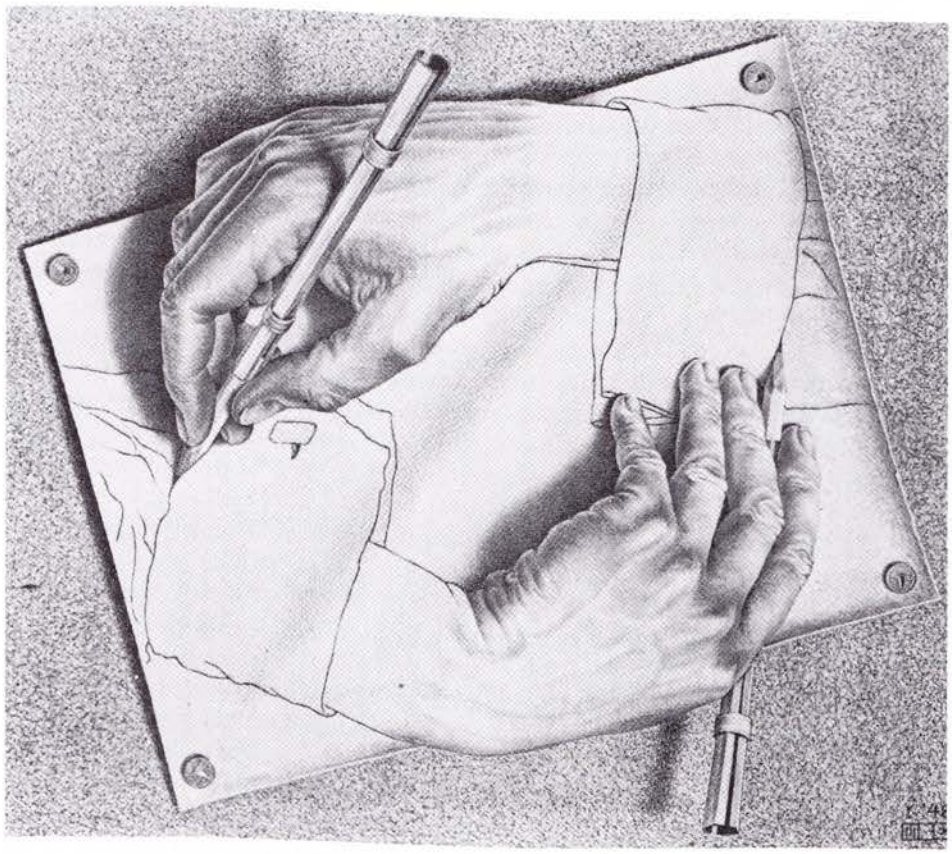
Social Change In addition to understanding how social life is organized and the consequences it produces, we also need to understand forces that promote change and those that tend to keep things the way they are. As a process, social change involves many factors, from social movements and new technology to changes in the natural environment. Although we know generally what promotes social change, a more difficult problem is understanding how and under what conditions different changes occur, from political revolution to the emergence of new forms of music or art. Why, for example, did the pro-democracy movements in Eastern Europe and China arise, and why did they succeed in the former but fail in the latter? How did the Industrial Revolution affect family life in the United States? What will it take for impoverished Third World nations to become industrialized?

In some ways we can look at social systems as always being in the process of change—sometimes rapidly, as in the case of revolution and the invention of new technology, but often more slowly, as in the transition from European feudalism to capitalism in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. In this sense, every understanding of how social life works also involves attention to how it changes. For this reason, although chapter 17 focuses on theories of change, the subject of change is raised throughout this book.

Individuals and Society While a great deal of sociological thinking focuses on larger questions about organization, consequences, and change, we also have to pay attention to the simple fact that social systems exist only through what people actually experience and do in relation to one another. To understand what this is about, we have to ask questions about the connection between individuals and social systems, including how we perceive and interpret ourselves and the world around us. How do we use language and behavior to participate in social life? How do we develop a stable sense of who we are, and how does this depend on our participation in social systems?

In an important sense, everything we do as individuals is in some way linked to the social environments in which we act. I sit alone in my office and write a book about sociology. Although this work in many ways feels intensely personal and private to me, if I tried to explain my behavior only in terms of my motivation and ability, I would be ignoring the social and material world within which I act. This book is socially possible because humans invented paper, ink, and printing presses, and developed language and the idea that writing books is socially valuable, allowing me to do it in exchange for a share of what other people produce—food, shelter, clothing, and so on. I am also writing this book because humans developed a particular way of thinking about social life (sociology), just as they developed ways of thinking about physical life (biology), matter and energy (physics), mental and emotional processes (psychology), the unknowable (religion), beauty (art), sound (music), and other cultures (anthropology).

A fundamental challenge of sociology is to understand the connection between individuals and their social environments, and to explain social life and participate in it at the same time. Our relationship to society is complex, reciprocal, and difficult to unravel, much like M. C. Escher's famous drawing of two hands drawing each other.



If I belonged to one of many other societies around the world, I would not be writing this book, because in those environments there would be no paper, presses, or audience of college students trying to understand the social world in a systematic way. So, what I do at this moment cannot be explained solely by my motives and thoughts; I must also understand my position in the social system within which I act as a human being, a context I did not create.

As individuals, we can use sociology as a window on the world and a mirror of our participation in it. This is difficult, however, for we actively participate in the very thing we are trying to understand. In addition, sociology challenges us to raise uncomfortable questions about our connections to social problems. As we begin to understand the social causes of personal troubles, we must acknowledge that as participants in social life we are connected in some way to them. Racism, sexism, and ageism are not problems only for those individuals who happen to have a particular skin color, sex, or age. We are understandably reluctant to connect ourselves with other people's troubles, and we resist giving up comfortable beliefs in order to see the world in new ways. As Berger (1963) wrote, a society

> provides us with warm, reasonably comfortable caves, in which we can huddle with our fellows, beating on the drums that drown out the howling hyenas of the surrounding darkness. "Ecstasy" is the act of stepping outside the caves alone, to face the night. (p. 150)

To "step outside" is to adopt a kind of consciousness that Mills (1959) called the "sociological imagination," a way of thinking about the social conditions in which individual and collective human life unfolds. It is to make sense of how

social systems operate and how we participate in them. It is to ask questions about the organization of social life, about the consequences it produces, about the dynamics of stability and change, and about the complex interconnections between people's lives and social systems and the effects they have on each other. It is, in short, to learn to think sociologically.

To learn how to think sociologically, we must begin with the basic concepts that define the sociological perspective—culture, structure, population, and ecology. For these we turn to the following three chapters that complete part 1.

CONNECTIONS

This chapter has introduced the idea of sociology as a way of thinking that involves a core of major concepts. As you review, what is most important for you to retain is a clear sense of what sociology is about, including the idea of social systems, their characteristics, and the four basic kinds of questions sociological thinking involves. Our focus, then, is on social systems and trying to understand how they operate, the consequences they produce, how they change, and how we as individuals participate in them.

Since the point of studying sociology is to learn to think in a new way rather than merely memorize a list of terms, it is important to develop a sense of sociology as a framework whose various parts are connected to each other. The next three chapters, for example, give a detailed look at the characteristics—cultural, structural, and population/ecological—that distinguish one social system from another. Although discussed in separate chapters, these are all related to one another in ways that produce what we know as social life.

As you read beyond part 1, you will see how sociological thinking makes sense of different aspects of social life, from socialization and deviance to racism, sexism, religion, and the family. Keep in mind that no matter where you are in the text, everything is connected to and flows from the basic sociological framework found in these first four chapters. I will remind you of this in various ways—sometimes in the chapter outlines, in Overview boxes inserted in the text, and in the "Connections" section that concludes each chapter. As you pay attention to all the "parts," then, also try to develop a sense of the "whole" that is sociology.

SUMMARY

1. What we know about one another consists largely of ideas we share about the social positions that people occupy. As individuals we participate in social systems in many ways; but sociology focuses primarily on patterns of appearance and behavior that are more likely in some social systems or positions than in others. Thus, all personal choices are to some degree reflections of the limitations on social life imposed by social systems.
2. Sociology is the study of social life and behavior, especially in relation to social systems and how they affect and are affected by the people who participate in them. One of the most difficult things to understand about social systems is that they are more than a sum of their parts.
3. Groups and societies are the two most important types of social systems.
4. Social systems have cultural characteristics, which consist primarily of ideas and material products. In both its material and its nonmaterial forms, culture is the major medium through which humans create and shape their world.

5. Social systems have two kinds of structural characteristics: the patterns of expectation that govern relationships involving individuals as well as entire social systems such as groups or societies; and the distribution of people among social positions and the distribution of valued rewards and resources such as wealth, power, and prestige.
6. Social systems and their physical environments have often-complex relationships through which they affect each other, especially through the size and distribution of a social system's population and how it makes use of its environment.
7. Sociological thinking involves questions of how social life is organized, the consequences this produces, how social systems change, and how individuals and social systems are related to each other.

KEY TERMS

culture 11
ecology 13
group 10
population 13
social structure 13
social system 9
society 11
sociology 9

LOOKING ELSEWHERE

Although chapter 1 is an introductory chapter whose themes form the basic structure of the book, having studied it you might want to look at related discussions in *Human Arrangements*, several of which expand on examples used here, such as

- interaction in college classrooms (chapter 8, pp. 164–67)
- gender roles and health (chapter 14, p. 336)
- theoretical perspectives in sociology (chapter 5, pp. 87–95)

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Berger, P. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology.* New York: Doubleday (available in paperback). An elegant introduction to the sociological perspective and the dilemmas posed by living as an individual in the social world.

Mills, C. W. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination.* New York: Oxford University Press. This brief paperback is a passionate view of sociology as both a perspective and a profession. Pay particular attention to chapter 1 ("The Promise"), a classic statement about the relationships between the "personal" and the "social," and to chapter 8 ("The Uses of History"), in which Mills urges an attention to history as a vital part of sociological thinking.