The first section of this book is designed to give you a basic review of sociological social psychology, the way that we approach research, and the larger field of sociology. The first chapter will review concepts in sociology that sociological social psychologists use in developing theories and research. We will also provide a basic overview of the three major perspectives in social psychology: symbolic interaction, social structure and personality, and group processes. Chapter 2 will review these perspectives extensively, providing detailed information about the theories and research within each approach. Chapter 3 will examine the major methods used in the field to study people.

At the beginning of each chapter, you will find a series of questions that we will address; at the end of each section of the chapter, we review how we have tried to answer these questions in that section. We end each chapter with a section titled “Bringing It All Together,” where we summarize the ways in which each section of the chapter relates to the other sections. We also include a series of discussion questions to provoke additional thinking about the chapters. Finally, we provide a list of key words used in each chapter and summaries of them. We believe that these tools will help you to learn the most central concepts, theories, and research in the field of sociological social psychology.
I guess you could say that I became obsessed with figuring the man out. He was so rude to me in the classroom that day, basically telling me that I had no business in college. I had to know what this guy was about. Was he just a jerk? Did he have a bad day? I wanted to know why he was so hurtful to me. I started asking around and everyone said that he was a great guy. Then I wondered if I might have been the problem—maybe I said something to set him off. I tried to ask him but he did not want to talk about it. The professor later told me that the guy was going through some hard times. Maybe that was it.

—Krystal, sophomore English major

Trying to understand the behaviors of other people can be puzzling. Although social psychologists take numerous approaches to looking at the social world, we all have an interest in understanding the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the people around us. You are probably reading this book because you also share this desire to learn about people. You may even have developed some personal theories about human behaviors. Some of these views may focus on a particular person—for example, a “theory” about why one of your friends has difficulty in dating relationships. But you may also have come up with larger-scale explanations to account for the behaviors of many people in various situations—for example, explaining behavior by saying, “It’s all about the money,” reflecting a belief that most actions are driven by material interests.

Although these personal opinions do not meet a social scientist’s criteria for “theory,” the general idea is the same: Social scientists seek to develop explanations for the often-complex ways that people act.

In the vignette that opens this chapter, we see a student trying to make sense of another student’s behavior. Apparently the second student has done something...
to her that makes her wonder what might have caused the behavior. At first she relies on the nature or personality of the other person: "Is he just a jerk?" Because the man will not tell her why he was rude, she has to rely on information from other people. She discovers that other people think highly of him and realizes that she probably does not have the whole picture. Gradually, she begins to put together a story about the man and how his current life circumstances may have contributed to his poor behavior.

Most of us engage in similar efforts to gather and use available information about people to have enough data to reach conclusions about them. In this way, we are all social scientists, searching the world around us for clues as to how and why people act the ways they do. But two crucial things separate social science from personal theories of human behavior. First, social scientists do not rely on speculation. They systematically test theories and often revise them based on what they learn by testing. Second, social scientists do not develop theories about the behavior of a single individual. Rather, social scientists seek to develop theories that explain how and why very different people will tend to behave in similar ways when facing similar situations or when placed in similar roles. Social psychologists develop theories and then test them by using observations, surveys, experiments, and other forms of research. Unlocking these social forces can be very powerful because seeing them helps us to predict others’ behavior.

Social psychology is the systematic study of people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior in social contexts. Social psychologists approach the study of human behavior in different ways. Some social psychologists focus on the impact of our immediate social environments on our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. But they soon find that even these immediate contexts are influenced by larger social forces and conditions. In the opening vignette, for example, Krystal could continue her social investigation by incorporating additional levels of analysis. She might investigate the larger social conditions that may be exacerbating this person’s immediate social problems. Maybe he recently lost his job in a recession, as part of a large-scale downsizing at his workplace, causing additional stresses in his life that led him to be more irritable on a day-to-day basis.

When sociologists study social psychology, they emphasize the ways in which society shapes the meanings of social interactions, while also assessing the effects of broad social conditions on our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sociological social psychologists study many of the same topics as psychological social psychologists—for example, emotions, identity, and attitudes—but they use theories and perspectives that tend to place emphasis on the role of society in social processes.

The goal of this book is to provide you with an extensive review of the theories and research developed by sociological social psychologists. In this chapter, we will offer a brief overview of the field of sociology and the ways in which sociological social psychologists incorporate the larger field of sociology into their work. Specifically, we will address the following questions:

- What is sociology? How does macrosociology differ from microsociology?
- Are there differences in the ways sociologists and psychologists approach social psychology?
Chapter 1: Introduction to Sociological Social Psychology

• What are the major perspectives in sociological social psychology?
• What do I need to know to study the impact of society on my day-to-day life?

Sociology, Psychology, and Social Psychology

Sociology first came alive to me after watching the film Fahrenheit 9/11. I didn’t agree with everything Michael Moore had to say about former President Bush, but his film made me wonder how much power other people had over me. It’s amazing that the president can send a bunch of troops to war, but I can’t even get the local government to fix the potholes down the street! I can’t even get the restaurant owner I work for to give me more time off when I want it. It just doesn’t seem right. Those people are not necessarily smarter than I am!

—Steve, junior Political Science major

Sociology is the systematic study of society. Society is a broad term that includes many levels of social interaction, from interactions among individuals to relationships among nations. Sociologists analyze social life across these levels of analysis (Aron 1965; Collins 1985). We usually think of society as a larger entity that exists above and beyond its individual members. Until something bad happens to us, we may not think much about the impact of society on our lives.
If a downturn in the economy leads to a job loss, for instance, we may blame the government or get angry at “the direction society is going.” But what do we mean by “society” beyond government rules and regulations? In what other ways can society affect our lives? Sociologists try to elaborate the specific ways that societal processes work to influence people’s lives.

In the previous vignette, we see “society” come alive for a student after he watches a controversial film about the American presidency. Steve notices that some people in our country have more power than others, and he questions whether those with power are actually any better than him. He seems to think that he is not different from the people in power: He believes he has the same abilities as politicians or business owners, so he should have some of the same control over others and over the way things work. Finally, Steve begins to question where that power comes from and who has the right to exercise power.

Steve’s experience helps him realize that some people in society have power over other people through the positions they hold. When sociologists study social life, their goals often include examining how people’s positions—for example, being married, being a woman, or being wealthy—affect their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and their power over others. This section will review the different levels of analysis found in sociology, including macrosociology and microsociology. It will also discuss differences in how psychologists and sociologists approach the study of social psychology. Finally, we will review the history of sociological social psychology.

**Macrosociology and Microsociology**

Our society and culture affect us in many ways; to understand these influences, sociologists study social phenomena in different ways. Suppose you are interested in studying racial discrimination. One way to explore this interest would be to conduct a field experiment in which employers are presented with resumes from fictitious pairs who differ only in race and to assess the number of callbacks from employers for African American versus white applicants. You also might study discrimination by examining how people experience racial stratification on a day-to-day basis; more specifically, in the lives and interactions of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (May 2001; Nash 2000). For example, you might find that minority group members, on average, are treated with more suspicion in retail stores than are members of the majority group. Both of these examples demonstrate the same basic social phenomena—discrimination that favors majority group members and disfavors minority group members. The studies, however, approach the issue in different ways.

**Macrosociology** focuses on the analysis of large-scale social processes. (See Boxes 1.1 and 1.2.) Instead of researching individual thoughts, feelings, and behavior, macrosociology looks at larger groups and social institutions (Nolan and Lenski 2004). Macrosociologists use societal-level data to examine phenomena such as poverty rates, incidence of violence, or large-scale social change. For instance, C. Wright Mills (2002, originally 1951) traced patterns of change in
Chapter 1: Introduction to Sociological Social Psychology

the American economy from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, showing the fall of independent farming and concurrent rise of white-collar professions. He went on to explain the long-term effects of the early American economy on the society and culture of the United States in the 1950s. Mills showed that companies in the bureaucratic age of the 1950s exerted a great deal of control over people’s lives, despite the emphasis that U.S. culture placed on independence and freedom. In Mills’s view, this converted the American middle classes from independent entrepreneurs to a group alienated from their own labor.

Macrosociologists also conduct studies across societies and cultures. There are currently 191 members of the United Nations (www.un.org), representing almost all countries in the world. Sociologists, especially demographers, examine differences in such parameters as fertility, mortality, and immigration rates across the world. For example, when researchers study how resource levels relate to trends in fertility and mortality, they find that some of the richest nations in the world—those with the most resources to raise children—have the lowest fertility and mortality rates (Pampel 2001).

Box 1.1 Macro-Level Sources of Information

Social psychological information is all around us. Macrosociologists, who use information that applies to whole societies, rely on a number of sources of data in particular. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov) is the hub of a great deal of demographic information about the United States today. In addition to conducting a count of the U.S. population every 10 years, the Census Bureau maintains current population estimates for the United States and the world. Census Bureau data is a valuable resource for sociologists interested in studying the U.S. population. It includes detailed information about Americans’ income levels, health, education, and housing, among many other topics. Sociologists regularly use census data to track important social issues such as poverty or segregation and to examine broad societal conditions associated with those issues—for example, comparing poverty rates by region, race, or gender.

The United Nations (www.un.org) and the World Bank (www.worldbank.org) provide extensive sets of data on nations across the world. Like the Census Bureau, these organizations allow researchers to examine basic demographic information for all the countries on the planet. Researchers can also use these data to study poverty, conflicts, and other important social issues. Macrosociologists use these and other sources of data to track large-scale social processes.

Although macro-level data may not directly relate to our day-to-day lives, it provides a context for understanding individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Macro-level data, including population size and literacy and unemployment rates, provide an understanding of the social and economic context of people’s lives and the types of problems people face in their daily lives.
The subject of this book is microsociology (the domain, in part, of sociological social psychology), the study of the effects of larger society on social psychological processes. In addition to studying the impact of larger social factors on individuals and their interactions, microsociologists are concerned with the role of the individual in the creation and maintenance of society.

As you can see, both macrosociologists and microsociologists study society, but they do it at different levels and in different ways. Consider divorce as a
social phenomenon. Macrosociologists are typically interested in rates of divorce and in how changing divorce rates affect the institution of the family. They may also compare divorce rates by region or across nations in an effort to understand the conditions that affect the rate of divorce in each country (Diekmann and Schmidheiny 2004; Wilde 2001; Yi and Deqing 2000). In contrast, microsociologists would be more interested in the perceived causes and outcomes of divorces than in the divorce rates. A microsociologist might conduct a study in which a number of divorced men and women talk about the factors that influenced their decisions to divorce their spouses. Or, a microsociologist might study the mental health consequences of going through a divorce and whether these consequences are different for women than for men. Both macrosociological and microsociological approaches contribute to our understanding of the social aspects of divorce. One involves societal-level factors, and the other involves the connection of society to the individual and individual-level perceptions—the senses people make of their divorces.

Both the macrosociological and microsociological levels of analysis require some understanding of the effects of the larger society on divorce. Social conditions provide a context for understanding interactions between individuals. In one study, a researcher examined divorce rates across 22 countries, finding that the rates are associated with marital equality (Yodanis 2005). That is, countries in which divorce is more common (represented by rates of divorce) also have a more equal distribution of work between men and women in the household. Hence, a “divorce culture” may affect men’s and women’s personal relationships in a direct way, giving women more leverage in their marriages. However, individuals may not be aware of how larger social conditions affect their decision-making processes, making it challenging to understand links between macro- and micro-level processes.

**Sociological and Psychological Social Psychology**

We have defined microsociology as the study of how the larger society influences basic social psychological processes. Some social psychologists come from the field of psychology, the study of human thought processes and behavior. There is some overlap between sociology and psychology. Scholars in sociology, particularly microsociology, like those in psychology, look at how the behaviors, thoughts, and emotions of individuals are created and modified by the social conditions in which they live. However, sociological social psychology, as we discussed earlier, is an extension of the larger field of sociology that emphasizes the impact of societal forces—in addition to immediate social contexts—on individuals’ lives.

Social contexts can range from a small group of people to the larger culture and social conditions manifested in a society as a whole. In a sense, social psychology serves as a natural bridge between the fields of sociology (which focuses on the social aspect) and psychology (which studies the individual) (see Figure 1.1). However, sociologists are more likely than psychologists to take into account the effects of larger structural forces on individual thoughts, feelings, and behavior. For
instance, sociologists are more likely than psychologists to compare the self-esteem levels of different racial and ethnic groups (Rosenberg 1986; Schieman, Pudrovksa, and Milkie 2005). Conversely, psychologists are more likely than sociologists to study the thinking processes associated with self-esteem (Crocker and Park 2003).

As a subfield of sociology, sociological social psychology brings sociological perspectives to the study of social psychology. Early scholars, such as William James (1842–1910), George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), and W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963), became well known for the ability to articulate how social forces influence our day-to-day interactions, as we will discuss in more detail throughout this book. During the same time period, as seen in Box 1.3, many psychologists were developing some of the prominent research and theories associated with individual behaviors and internal thought processes.

**Historical Context of Sociological Social Psychology**

The term sociology was coined by French social philosopher August Comte (1798–1857). Comte first defined the field of sociology in 1838, later than other sciences such as economics and biology. Comte was a staunch positivist. Positivism is the belief that the scientific method is the best approach to the production of knowledge. Comte attempted to place sociology in the context of more traditional scientific fields. In his view, the complexities of social dynamics would make sociology the most challenging scientific field. We as sociologists think about all the factors that influence what people do on a daily basis—the situational, structural, and historical conditions that lead people to do the things that they do. Although some people believe that social behavior is too complex to understand using the scientific method, we believe that the same features that make sociology a most challenging discipline also make it a most interesting one.
Chapter 1: Introduction to Sociological Social Psychology

The generation of sociologists who followed August Comte began to make keen observations about the connection of society to the individual. Sociologists such as George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and William Thomas (1863–1947) helped found a uniquely American school of social psychology at the University of Chicago. Mead studied how social conditions affect our senses of self. Thomas (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958) focused on the role of life histories as a way of assessing the effects of social and historical changes on individuals' lives over time. This research led to the classic book, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (originally published in intervals between 1918 and 1920). The ideas of these early sociologists helped in the creation of symbolic interactionism, a perspective in sociological social psychology that will be reviewed in detail in this and subsequent chapters.

Other major contributors to the development of sociological social psychology include Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) and Georg Simmel (1858–1918). Cooley (1909) contributed to the development of sociological social psychology with his theoretical formulation of primary and secondary groups. Primary groups refer to small groups of people with whom we have face-to-face contact, such as our friends and family, whereas secondary groups are larger and less intimate. Cooley argued that primary and secondary groups produce fundamentally different types of interactions (see Chapter 2). Simmel, a German sociologist at the University of Berlin, viewed society as a complex network of interactions between dyads (two-person groups) and triads (three-person groups) (Simmel 1950). (See also Chapter 2). Finally, W. E. B. Du Bois, an American sociologist writing in the mid-1800s into the twentieth century, helped in part to elaborate the social psychological dimensions of racial discrimination in the United States.

Box 1.3 Psychoanalysis in Psychology

Psychologists generally are interested in internal processes. The German psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) popularized the idea of the unconscious mind and the development of personality over time. Freud’s psychoanalytic method was designed as a means of gaining access to an individual’s subconscious thoughts. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the role of conscious and unconscious processes that manifest themselves in everyday life. The role of the psychoanalyst is to access all these inner thoughts and feelings in an effort to liberate individuals from their problems by resolving the internal conflicts that have evolved over time. Hence, the analyst must often reconstruct life events and childhood experiences—a process that may take years of analysis to accomplish (Cockerham 2003). The impact of larger social conditions does enter into the psychoanalytic perspectives, but the analysts tend to focus primarily on internal dynamics. Sociologists, by contrast, are less likely to draw a dividing line between internal and external worlds; rather, we view thoughts and feelings as a continual exchange of information between internal and external sources.

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These sociological social psychologists helped to lay the foundation for the perspectives and theories that modern social psychologists use to study human behavior in a social context. The next section will elaborate on the perspectives that they helped to create.

Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead are two of the founding sociological social psychologists. Their work inspired generations of sociologists to study social psychology. Their influence led to the development of the Cooley-Mead Award from the Social Psychology Section of the American Sociological Association to recognize outstanding contributions to the field of social psychology. All of the persons profiled in biographies in subsequent chapters were recipients of this prestigious award.

**Charles Horton Cooley***

Charles Horton Cooley was born on August 17, 1864, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He was the son of Mary Elizabeth Horton and the renowned law school professor and State Supreme Court Justice Thomas McIntyre Cooley. After attending the University of Michigan for several years, Cooley graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering. After some work and traveling, he returned to the University of Michigan for graduate work in political economy and sociology in 1890. Cooley received his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1894.

Cooley became an assistant professor of sociology and taught the University of Michigan's first sociology course in 1899. Cooley spent a great deal of time speculating and contemplating the subject of self and its relationship to society. He observed the development of his own children, which he used to help construct his own theories.

Cooley participated in the founding of the American Sociological Society (now American Sociological Association [ASA]) in 1905 and served as its eighth president in 1918. In his work *Personal Competition* (1899), he found that as the United States was expanding and becoming more industrialized, people seemed to become more individualistic and competitive, appearing to exhibit less concern for family and neighborhood. Some of Cooley's other works were inspired by this trend and include *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902) on symbolism of the self and *Social Organization* (1909) in which he discusses the importance of primary groups. In 1928, Cooley's health began to fail, and in March of 1929 he was diagnosed with cancer. He died shortly after on May 7, 1929.

**George Herbert Mead**

George Herbert Mead was born on February 27, 1863, in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Mead's family moved to Oberlin, Ohio, in 1870 where his father, Hiram Mead, became a professor at the Oberlin Theological Seminary. Mead earned his master's degree in philosophy at Harvard University; then traveled to Leipzig,
Germany, with his close friend Henry Castle and Henry's sister, Helen Castle (who he later married), to pursue graduate work in philosophy and physiological psychology at the University of Leipzig. He later transferred to the University of Berlin to study physiological psychology and economic theory.

Mead's graduate work was interrupted in 1891 by the offer of an instructorship in philosophy and psychology at the University of Michigan. He never completed his Ph.D. In 1894, Mead took a teaching position at the University of Chicago, where he stayed until he died in 1931. Mead went on to make substantial contributions in both social psychology and philosophy. His major contribution to the field of social psychology was his attempt to show how the human self arises in the process of social interaction, especially by the way of linguistic communication (later called symbolic interaction). A compilation of some his best writings can be found in the book *Mind, Self, & Society* (1934).

*Information about Charles Horton Cooley was obtained from the American Sociological Association website (www.asanet.org); details about George Herbert Mead’s biography come from Baldwin (1986).*

**Section Summary**

In this section of the chapter, we answered the questions: What is sociology? How does macrosociology differ from microsociology? What are the differences in the ways sociologists and psychologists study social psychology? We defined sociology as the systematic study of society. Some sociologists focus on macro-level processes in society, the study of societies as a whole. Other sociologists focus on micro-level processes, the systematic study of people’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior in social context. Although both sociologists and psychologists study social psychology, sociological social psychologists emphasize the impact of large social forces in our lives. Important historical figures in sociological social psychology include George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, Georg Simmel, and W. E. B. Dubois, among others.

**Perspectives in Sociological Social Psychology**

Johnny and I got along really well when we worked together at the copy shop. Then he got a promotion—he became my boss. All of a sudden, he started ordering me around and wouldn’t joke with me anymore. In fact, he stopped hanging around with me—he got new friends in management, I guess. I say his position went to his head, making him act the way he did. My friends say that it is natural for people to change when they become the managers.

—Susan, junior Management major

There are many different ways to investigate the role of society in people’s day-to-day lives. You may decide to focus on your immediate social surroundings, or
you may try to understand the effects of larger social institutions—for example, the economy—on people's lives. In this vignette, Susan is trying to understand how a promotion could lead to such dramatic changes in the behavior of her friend—now her boss. Could a simple promotion really lead a person to such an abrupt change in personality?

Susan's friends answer the question somewhat differently than she does. They analyze Johnny's behavior differently, based on their perspectives. Similarly, sociological social psychologists work within broad perspectives that reflect their orientations, though social psychologists are usually interested in constructing general explanations for behaviors across people, times, and places. The three perspectives most used to characterize sociological social psychology are symbolic interaction, social structure and personality, and group processes (House 1977; Smith-Lovin and Molm 2000). We review the basic tenets of each of these perspectives in this chapter and will elaborate on them in Chapter 2. (See also Table 1.1.)

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism merges elements of psychology with macrosociology in an attempt to explain the relationship between the individual and society. **Symbolic interactionism** is the study of how people negotiate the meaning of social life during their interactions with other people. George Herbert Mead is often credited as the father of symbolic interactionism. In a compiled volume of his works, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, Mead (1934) argued that we create meaning through our interactions with the people around us. Once agreed on, that meaning becomes our social reality. The meanings we attach to ourselves, other people, and objects are negotiated over time. We use language to give meaning to everything in our lives and in the world around us.

**Table 1.1 Three Perspectives in Sociological Psychology: A Comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>View of the Role of Individual in Society</th>
<th>Area of Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic interaction</td>
<td>Individual is active participant in construction of society</td>
<td>Meaning-making processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social structure and personality</td>
<td>The nature of interaction is based on adherence to roles that people play</td>
<td>Emphasizes process of how larger social structures influence individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group processes</td>
<td>When individuals form into social groups, certain basic processes regularly emerge in interactions</td>
<td>Processes that occur in group contexts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Perspectives in Sociological Social Psychology*
From the symbolic interactionist perspective, the important connection between society and our inner experiences lies in our interactions with other people. These interactions provide information about the world, which we then accept or modify for our own use (Heise 1999; Mead 1934; Rosenberg 1990).

**Social Structure and Personality**

The social structure and personality perspective focuses on the connections between larger societal conditions and the individual—specifically, on the influence of social structure on individuals. Social structure refers to “persisting patterns of behavior and interaction between people or social positions” (House 1992, p. 526). Because there is stability among relationships and positions, sociologists study these patterns and their effects on individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

The social structure and personality perspective can potentially explain the vignette that opens this section. One of the characters, Johnny, is promoted to a new position and starts acting differently. His new position may require that he order people around, regardless of his feelings toward his co-workers. From the social structure and personality perspective, our positions in society dictate, to some degree, the ways we are expected to think, feel, and behave. Perhaps the change in position caused Johnny to rethink his relationship to his former co-workers. Other elements of social structure that can affect our lives will be reviewed in Chapter 2.

**Group Processes**

The third face of sociological social psychology, group processes, studies how basic social processes operate in group contexts (Smith-Lovin and Molm 2000). Groups are an important part of society and a significant area of social psychological research in both sociology and psychology. Because it takes only two people to make a group, and because humans are inherently social, we all spend a considerable amount of time in our lives in group settings, including with family, friends, and co-workers. The group processes perspective studies our interactions and positions within and across these groups.

Group processes scholars are particularly interested in processes that come into play when groups form. Status is an example. When you form into groups in your classes, you might notice that some people talk more and have their opinions solicited more often than others. How are these differences determined? Power is another group process. When you negotiate the price of a car, certain features of the setting give you or the other person more power to set the final price. What are these situational characteristics that confer power? Justice is another example. When you decide whether the money you earn at your job is fair, you do so by comparing yourself to other people. What groups do we compare ourselves to in these situations, and how do we come to decide that things are fair or unfair? In short, group processes scholars are interested in answering these sorts of questions by studying the processes—such as status, power, and justice—that occur in group contexts.
Section Summary

The goal of this section was to answer the question: What are the major perspectives in sociological social psychology? We defined three major perspectives, or “faces,” in social psychology: symbolic interaction, social structure and personality, and group processes. The symbolic interaction face examines how people negotiate the meaning of social life through interactions with other people. The social structure and personality face of sociological social psychology focuses on the connections between larger societal conditions and the individual. Finally, the group processes face emphasizes how basic social processes develop in group contexts. These three faces of social psychology will be used to structure how we present research and theories throughout this book.

Your Social Psychological Tool Kit

_I remember my first social psychology course. There is so much to know—so many different topics and chapters. I am not really sure how to bring it all together. Human life is so complex…._

—Jamal, sophomore Psychology major

Jamal’s story is probably a familiar one for many students who are just starting to study the social sciences. Understanding the social contexts of human behavior means that you must be able to incorporate almost all the elements of both the macro and the micro levels of society—how the influence of society plays out in social structures as well as in interactions among individuals. On your journey through social psychology, there are a few essential tools that you can take with you: the concepts and terms that sociologists employ in developing and describing their theories and research. We will be using these concepts throughout this text to help you understand how sociologists develop, carry out, and interpret social psychological research.

The Sociological Imagination

The impact of society in our lives is complex. How do we develop the ability to “see” society in our daily lives? Peter Berger (1973) says that we can see social forces in everyday life through individuals’ expressions and behavior. We make choices every day without much conscious thought—such as purchasing food and clothing or spending time with friends and family. How do these choices reflect larger cultural values and norms? Berger stresses the importance of developing the ability to see how what we do in our day-to-day lives reflects larger social forces.

An important tool for seeing such forces in your life is the sociological imagination—the ability to see our personal lives in the context of the history, culture, and social structure of the larger society within which we live. C. Wright Mills (1959) argued that sociologists must understand the larger cultural, structural, and historical conditions influencing individuals before arriving at any
conclusions about the causes of their decisions or experiences. Specifically, Mills said, “The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (p. 5).

The sociological imagination gives social psychologists the vision necessary to assess all the possible social conditions that may influence individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and behavior. If we limit our perspective on the social world to explanations that do not take social factors into consideration, we will miss some of the possible causal explanations for behavior. In a classic example, Durkheim (1951, originally 1897) questioned the traditional approach to understanding suicide, which focused on the mental health of the individual. He proposed that suicide rates are influenced by societal conditions, above and beyond personal problems. Durkheim first examined his ideas by comparing suicide rates over time and in different countries. He found that both time and place affected suicide rates—something that would not be true if suicide simply reflected factors internal to an individual. Durkheim concluded that suicide had to be, in part, a manifestation of social issues as well as personal problems. His research showed that groups that are better integrated into society have lower suicide rates than groups with fewer social connections. For instance, married people, who are presumably better integrated into society as part of a social unit, were less susceptible to suicide than singles.

Other Tools in Your Kit

The sociological imagination is a tool that social psychologists can use to understand the influence of society on individuals. What exactly are we looking for? From a social psychological perspective, society exists both within and between individuals. It also takes the form of our positions in society and the expectations associated with those positions, which give us different levels of power and access to resources. When we try to see the larger influences of society, we must consider our relative positions in groups as well as how our culture views those relationships and positions. Society, from this perspective, is only as stable as the people, positions, and relationships it comprises. In a sense, society exists amid both stability and change, as people either accept existing rules or try to change them to meet the needs of contemporary life. The following concepts will help you know what to look for as you are trying to identify “society” as an influence in your day-to-day life.

Social Norms and Values

Social norms are behavioral guidelines—the rules that regulate our behavior in relationships. If society exists through our relationships with one another, then it is guided by the rules of conduct that apply to those relationships. One of the first things we learn about a society is its rules of conduct. Values differ from social norms in that they refer to especially deeply held ideals and beliefs. The laws of a given society codify many of its shared values and norms. For example, murder is considered such a destructive behavior that we impose large penalties for committing such an act. Other lesser violations of norms, such as doing something
You will not go to jail for putting a lampshade on your head, but you may be the target of ostracism from others. Society, then, can influence people's behaviors by establishing both formal and informal rules of conduct.

We can discover a society's formal rules by examining its laws. But the process of identifying informal rules is more complex (see Box 1.4). People may not even be aware that they are following norms on a day-to-day basis. In Tally’s Corner, Elliot Liebow (1967) observed a group of poor men living in Washington, DC, during the 1960s. The men’s lives revolved around a corner carryout restaurant, where some men were waiting for work or just “hanging out.” Every man had a different reason for hanging out at the corner—some men were waiting for someone to offer a part-time job, others were avoiding their families, and still inappropriate in front of a crowd, may be met only with public embarrassment.

**Box 1.4 Ethnomethodology**

Harold Garfinkel (b. 1917) proposed a method of studying society as reflected in our typical, day-to-day interactions that he called *ethnomethodology* (Garfinkel 1967). Ethnomethodology is both a theory and a method of inquiry. That is, it is a theoretical understanding of the linkages between the individual and society, and it is also a methodological approach to studying the relationship between the individual and society. One way that ethnomethodologists study informal social norms is through breaching experiments.

**Breaching experiments** include any method of violating social order to assess how people construct social reality (Ritzer 1996). Garfinkel was famous for asking students to perform breaching acts and report on reactions to these events. In a classic example, students were instructed to engage in a conversation and insist that their partner explain commonplace remarks. The following excerpt comes from Garfinkel’s (1967) book, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.

SUBJECT: I had a flat tire.
EXPERIMENTER: What do you mean, you had a flat tire?

SUBJECT (appears momentarily stunned and then replies in a hostile manner):
What do you mean, “What do you mean?” A flat tire is a flat tire. That is what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question.

This interaction demonstrates that there are implicit rules that we expect not to be questioned during a simple exchange. When those rules are broken, there is an emotional reaction (note the hostility of the subject), followed by an attempt to restore order (restating the comment about the flat tire) and explain the interruption; in this case, the subject explains the experimenter’s question as simply crazy. Such interactions are essential to the appearance of social order in everyday life. However, we may not be aware of such rules until they are broken in some way. Breaching experiments provide a way of finding and assessing informal norms and values.

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others were just socializing. Despite their different reasons for being on the corner, all of them converged there on a regular basis, and this served as a norm of street-corner life, although the norm guiding behavior was not driven by the same motivation for each individual. Relationships set up expectations of behavior that can operate above and beyond our thought processes. Alternatively, these norms can serve as a script, offering us a limited set of behavioral options from which we can choose.

**Roles and Statuses**

Another aspect of society consists of the roles and statuses that people occupy. Status refers to a person’s position in a group or society that is associated with varying levels of prestige and access to resources. Statuses are often formalized so that the relative standings of group members can be easily identified. In a workplace setting, for instance, a supervisor is paid to manage a group of people and may be given the right to tell people what to do. Other times, status develops more informally.

Our status usually includes a set of expectations about how to behave in a group. These expectations refer to our roles in society. Roles and statuses are related but distinct concepts. For instance, medical doctors have relatively high status in Western society. Expectations associated with their roles include looking after the health of their patients. Some business leaders also have high status.
in society, but expectations for these persons are quite different. In other words, top business leaders and medical doctors may occupy similar status positions, but they hold noticeably different roles in society. Statuses, then, refer to our positions in a group or society, whereas roles refer to the specific expectations about how to behave in those positions.

Organizations and Institutions
Society is also reflected in the regular patterns of behavior and relationships among people. Norms of behavior may include regular work schedules (for example, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) and sleep patterns. Much of this regulation exists within organizations—groups that share a common purpose and contain a formal set of rules and authority structure. Our work and school lives revolve around meeting the demands of our superiors within the rules of those organizations. At work, we are paid to produce a product or service, but we must do so within certain guidelines and procedures. At school, we must turn in papers and tests to our teachers to be judged worthy of a passing grade.

When the accumulation of both formal and informal norms produces patterns of behavior for an entire group or even a whole society, these norms, collectively, are often referred to as an institution. A social institution consists of patterns of interaction in which the behavior of a large group is guided by the same norms and roles (Jary and Jary 1991) (see Box 1.5). Traditionally, sociologists have divided society into five major institutions: family, economy, religion, education, and government. Although the norms and rules that govern these
institutions may vary by society, almost all human societies have some way of raising children (family), systems of exchange (economy), and an education system. In addition to being found in most or all of the countries in the world today, these institutions have been found to have existed in societies going back thousands of years.

Institutions are different from other sets of relationships in life because they involve complex sets of rules or laws that serve to guide behaviors. For instance, there are many formal and informal rules governing the family in the United States. Laws restrict the number of spouses that are allowed in a family and other behaviors such as spousal or child abuse. There are also informal rules of conduct in the family. For instance, it is not necessarily illegal to have affairs outside of marriage, but opinion polls continually show that most Americans frown on such behavior (Newport 2009). Individuals usually learn the rules associated with a given institution through their interactions with other people in society.

Culture
Each society has its own culture—its unique patterns of behavior and beliefs. The norms, roles, and relationships that make up social institutions vary from one society to another, giving each society its own “personality.” For example, two societies may have very different sets of expectations associated with being a father. Hence, to study people from different places, we must examine the ways in which these people’s lives reflect their cultures. Researchers must also recognize that a given group or society has its own unique set of institutions—different from those that may exist in the researcher’s own culture. For example, the media may be a significant institution in American life, but it is probably less important in countries with little access to television or the Internet.

The components of culture include language, symbols, values and beliefs, norms, and material artifacts (see Box 1.6). Differences in language are often most immediately apparent between societies. We use different words and symbols to represent some of the same objects and ideas. Even subtle differences between cultures can have large implications for how people live their lives. In a classic example, “The Body Ritual of the Nacerima,” Horace Miner (1956) described a “foreign” culture in which the primary belief is that the body is ugly and has a natural tendency toward disease. As a result, the “tribe members” visit “magical practitioners” for the mouth and body on a regular basis. Eventually, readers discover that the “Nacirema” are simply “Americans” (Nacirema is American spelled backward!)

Miner’s point is that it is hard to understand our own culture unless we step outside it enough to see how what we consider “normal” may look to outsiders. Although we can think independently of the people around us, we often make our choices within cultural limitations. In a simple example, when you are thirsty, you may choose to buy bottled water even when tap water is safe because it is valued as “pure” in your culture; however, this may not be something that people would do in a society that is more critical of marketers’ claims about purity. Rather, they might see such a purchase as wasteful of money and contributing to environmental degradation from leftover plastic bottles.
In similar fashion, society provides both formal and informal rules for making more important decisions—for example, about marriage and intimate partnership. Some cultures limit marital relationships to a single man and woman. Some Western cultures have recently extended legal marriage to couples of the same sex. Some other cultures allow for multiple partners, but only in the context of marriage. Sociologists try to understand the societal and cultural guidelines that influence the behavior of individuals in a given society.

The social psychological study of culture also emphasizes the ways in which individuals contribute to the development and maintenance of culture in everyday life. How are the formal and informal rules that guide behaviors transmitted from one group to another? How do they change over time? These processes can be studied in the context of socialization among small groups of family members and friends. For instance, Gary Alan Fine (1979) studied a group of youth baseball teams by observing the culture of each group and the changes in those cultures over time. He found that the culture of the group changed as new people entered and left the group but that some consistency was maintained as new members learned the ways of the group from older, more senior team members. These processes, however, were stratified—some children, new or old, had more control over creation and maintenance of culture than others.

**Box 1.6 Elements of Culture**

Sociological social psychologists must be aware of elements of culture that have effects on our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. These include symbols, values and beliefs, language, norms, and material culture.

- **Symbols:** Anything that carries a particular meaning recognized by people who share the same culture
- **Values and beliefs:** Standards by which people assess desirability, goodness, and beauty that serve as both guidelines for living (values) and specific statements that people hold to be true (beliefs)
- **Language:** A system of symbols that allows people to communicate
- **Norms:** Rules and expectations for people’s behavior within a society
- **Material culture:** The tangible artifacts of culture—for example, cars, houses, clothing, and computers

The various elements of culture often interact to help us interpret a social situation and decide how to react to other people. People from different cultures may understand the meaning of an action differently and, as a result, may respond with different sets of feelings and actions. To an American, for example, the gesture of raising the middle finger is likely to produce feelings of anger, perhaps leading to an aggressive response. In England, the same gesture may produce no feelings or even be interpreted in a positive manner. Such cultural variations are important to understanding social psychological phenomena.
Section Summary

The final section of this chapter answered the question: What do I need to know to study the effects of society in my day-to-day life? Here, we introduce an important concept in the field of sociology, the sociological imagination, which is a tool to help you see the larger context of people’s decisions and behaviors. In addition, we have given you a tool kit to help you develop the sociological imagination, a kit that includes important concepts that sociologists use in research, including norms, values, statuses, roles, institutions, and culture. All these concepts help to illuminate the effects of society on individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Bringing It All Together

There is so much to study in social psychology. I feel like I can’t take it all in sometimes. I look forward to signing up for classes because I know that each one represents another aspect of human life to be studied. I truly wish I had the time to take more classes!

—Jacky, senior Sociology major

Jacky’s attitude toward social psychology is reasonable given the size and scope of the field. Social psychologists study many aspects of human life—everything from the social factors influencing feelings of love to studies of behaviors in small groups. You will probably find some of those areas more interesting than others, and you may also find that some areas of social life are not covered in this or any other textbook.

Our goal in this book is to provide you with an overview of sociological social psychology—its perspectives, theories, and concepts—along with the skills necessary to evaluate theories and judge research in the social sciences more broadly. After several introductory chapters, we will review various areas of research in sociological social psychology. Think of each chapter as a sociological journey into a new area of social life.

As you begin your investigation into sociological social psychology, you should be ready to use your sociological imagination to see how society influences individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and behavior. The theories and research we review in this book should help you develop your imagination. The first part of the book will introduce you to the major perspectives and methods used by sociological social psychologists. The next part applies these perspectives to the studies of self and society, with a discussion of social psychological perspectives on the construction of stratification and our senses of self and identity. The final part considers applications of social psychological research to the study of different aspects of social life, including deviance, mental health, and emotions.

One primary goal of this book is to make the social psychological theories, concepts, and research findings applicable to your daily life. We encourage you to try to apply what you read to your own life, to your interactions at home, at work,
and among friends, and to the things you see and hear in the media. Think about this book both as an introduction to the field of sociological social psychology and as the start of a larger journey into the study of social life.

**Summary**

1. Sociology is the study of society. Sociologists look at society from both the macro and the micro level of analysis.
2. Both psychological and sociological social psychologists study the social contexts of human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sociologists, however, also apply the perspectives and methods of the field of sociology to the study of social psychology.
3. Sociology was first defined in 1838 by French social philosopher August Comte, who applied the principles of the scientific method to society. Some of the founders of sociological social psychology include George Herbert Mead, W. E. B. DuBois, William Thomas, Charles Horton Cooley, and Georg Simmel.
4. Three major perspectives in sociological social psychology include symbolic interactionism, social structure and personality, and group processes.
5. Sociologists use a tool kit consisting of methods and concepts for studying the role of society in social psychological processes. Their tools include such concepts as statuses, roles, norms and values, culture, and social institutions, which they apply to the study of human thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

**Key Terms and Concepts**

**Breaching experiments**: Experiments that violate the established social order to assess how people construct social reality.

**Culture**: A society's set of unique patterns of behavior and beliefs.

**Ethnomethodology**: A method of studying society through observation of people's typical day-to-day interactions.

**Group processes**: A perspective within sociological social psychology that examines how basic social processes operate in group contexts.

**Macrosociology**: The study of societies as a whole.

**Microsociology**: The study of the effects of society on socio-psychological processes, in part the domain of sociological social psychology.

**Organizations**: Groups that share a common purpose and contain a formal set of rules and authority structure.

**Psychology**: The study of human thought processes and behaviors.

**Roles**: A set of expectations about how to behave in a group.
Social institution: Patterns of interactions in which behavior within a large group is guided by a common set of norms and roles.

Social norms: The rules that regulate our behavior in relationships.

Social psychology: The systematic study of people’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior in social contexts.

Social structure: Persisting patterns of behavior and interaction between people within identified social positions.

Social structure and personality: A perspective within sociological social psychology that focuses on the connections between larger societal conditions and the individual.

Sociological imagination: The ability to see personal lives in the context of the larger society—its history, culture, and social structure.

Sociology: The systematic study of society.

Status: A person’s position in a group or society that is associated with varying levels of prestige and access to resources.

Symbolic interactionism: A perspective within sociological social psychology that emphasizes the study of how people negotiate the meaning of social life during their interactions with other people.

Values: Deeply held ideals and beliefs.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you define society from your own perspective? How do you picture the role of society in your life?

2. In this chapter, we reviewed a number of perspectives on human behavior. Can you think of any other ways of understanding social interaction that are not covered in these perspectives?

3. What if you found out that you had an identical twin raised in another culture, and she was quite different from you? How would that help you see the influence of society? Employ your sociological imagination to answer the question.