Discovering Sociology

“The first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem.”
—Peter Berger, Invitation to Sociology

The premise is simple. Sixteen total strangers are dropped off in the middle of nowhere with only the most rudimentary supplies—usually a knife, a pot or pan for boiling water, enough rice for one or two meals, and a flint for starting a fire. They must start from scratch and build shelter; locate a fresh water supply, or at least build a fire to boil water; and protect themselves from wildlife. More important, they must build some type of society and establish some rules for living, because for the next 39 days their survival depends on one another. Cooperation is paramount. Teamwork is essential. And, by the way, they are competing against each other for a grand prize of $1 million that will be awarded to the “Sole Survivor.”

The so-called “reality” television show Survivor has enjoyed several successful seasons as one of the most popular and highest rated programs shown around the world. Viewers are vicariously transported to exotic locations such as the island of Palau Tiga, the outback of Australia, and the...
Amazon rainforest. Contestants range from 20-something bikini-clad swimsuit models, bare-chested personal fitness trainers, and former Olympians to 50-something grandmothers, ex-professional football players, and goat farmers. Survival skills are tested as participants build shelter, forage for food, and compete in “reward challenges” involving athletic and mental contests and “immunity challenges” to avoid getting voted out of the “tribe.” Each season has pitted young against old, blacks against whites and other racial and ethnic groups, men against women, blue-collar workers against professionals, devout Christians against atheists, openly gay contestants against homophobes, and one season even featured a hearing-impaired contestant. First they compete in teams; later it becomes an individual competition.

At first, it seems that the “fittest” will survive, so young, athletic, muscular ex-military types seem to have a clear advantage over weaker, less physically gifted opponents. Yet, both contestants and viewers soon realize that survival involves far more than youth, vigor, and physical fitness. In each episode, alliances are made and broken; rumors run rampant; hunting, fishing, and cooking skills become less important than diplomacy and the ability to “fly under the radar” to avoid making enemies. In the end, Survivor millionaires have included the most obnoxious and hated tribal member (Richard from season 1), the most popular and friendly tribal member (Tina from season 2), and a self-confessed “spoiled brat,” a 22-year-old swimsuit model (Jenna from season 6). In fact, most viewers, contestants, and winners agree that each season’s “Sole Survivor” has been totally unpredictable.

You may ask, “What does the television program Survivor have to do with sociology?” At first, the answer seems to be, “nothing,” yet, if one looks beneath the surface of the mere voyeuristic and entertainment aspects of the program, the answer is, more accurately, “everything.” Although “reality television” may be far removed from most people’s reality, the program underscores what sociologists have always known: age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, social class, religion, groups, and social networks are but a few of the important variables that affect how people interact and survive in the real world. More important, each season and every episode of Survivor has illustrated the first wisdom of sociology and the guiding theme of this book: things are not necessarily what they seem (Berger, 1963).

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Sociology is the systematic and scientific study of human behavior, social groups, and society. Sociologists examine structural and institutional forces that shape our everyday lives, behaviors, and social values and look at how we help create those social structures and institutions. Table 1.1 compares and contrasts sociology to other social and behavioral sciences and related disciplines. Sociology is an academic discipline, but this does not mean that it is simply “a thing to be studied . . . sociology is, first of all, a thing lived” (Lemert, 2008:xv). Perhaps sociologist Peter Berger (1963:4) said it best when he wrote, “Sociology is not a practice but an attempt to understand.” This requires that sociologists look at everyday events a little differently from the way most people do. Our goal in this book is to help you better understand the world in which you live and your place in it by helping you to develop your sociological imagination and to learn to think sociologically.

Do you sometimes enjoy the peace and solitude of being alone? At other times do you like being with other people, celebrating your achievements or sharing your concerns? If you are like most people, the answer to both questions is probably “Yes.” Although all of us enjoy some time alone, we also need and actively seek the company and security of other people. We congregate to establish families, groups, tribes,
Sociology and Other Social and Behavioral Sciences and Related Disciplines

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Focus</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sociology</strong></td>
<td>Studies human behavior with emphasis on social structure, social</td>
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<td></td>
<td>groups, interaction, and society.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Psychology</strong></td>
<td>Studies human behavior with emphasis on individuals, personality,</td>
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<td>and biology.</td>
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<td><strong>Anthropology</strong></td>
<td>Studies past human behavior with emphasis on past cultures and</td>
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<td>(Cultural)</td>
<td>preindustrial societies.</td>
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<td><strong>History</strong></td>
<td>Studies human behavior with emphasis on people and events of the</td>
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<td>past.</td>
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<td><strong>Economics</strong></td>
<td>Studies human behavior with emphasis on the economy and the</td>
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<td>exchange of goods and services.</td>
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<td><strong>Political Science</strong></td>
<td>Studies human behavior with emphasis on political institutions,</td>
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<td>government, power, and authority.</td>
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<td><strong>Criminal Justice</strong></td>
<td>An applied field that uses sociological and criminological theories</td>
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<td>to explain the creation, causation, and control of crime. Focuses on</td>
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<td>criminal procedures, law enforcement, and corrections.</td>
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<td><strong>Social Work</strong></td>
<td>An applied field that uses sociological and psychological theories</td>
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<td>to explain social problems and to operate agencies designed to</td>
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<td>alleviate some of the consequences of these problems.</td>
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Communities, nations, and many other organizations, some of which transcend national boundaries. This social imperative sets us apart from other animals, and, though it is survival-related, it transcends mere biological or instinctive drives to cluster for survival. As we form collectivities, we make both conscious and unconscious choices to sacrifice some of our individual freedoms, but at the same time we derive many social benefits from the process. This interdependence between society and the individual is the primary focus of sociology, and understanding it requires the development of a sociological imagination—a quality of mind that provides an understanding of ourselves within the context of the larger society (Mills, 1959). Sociological Focus 1.1 describes how one of the authors had his sociological imagination sparked and became a sociologist.

**The Sociological Imagination**

By using our sociological imaginations, we can better see the relationship between ourselves and the society in which we live. Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) contended that this requires that we grasp the connection between history (events that have shaped an entire society’s values and beliefs) and biography (an individual’s life experiences within a particular society). This important link is often overlooked, but it is essential for sociological understanding, because it places individual behavior in a larger social context. It reminds us that we, as individuals, are to some extent products of the particular society and historical period in which we live, but also acknowledges that we are history makers who help produce and change society by our actions. We can only guess what would have happened to the civil rights movement of the 1960s if the late Rosa Parks had given up her seat to the white man and moved to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. Or what might have transpired if she had refused to do so 30 years earlier, in the 1920s. Sociology teaches us that everything, from the most heroic and spectacular actions to the most mundane and taken-for-granted features of our existence, reflects the dynamic interplay between the individual and society.

**Personal Troubles versus Social Issues** A sociological imagination allows us to see the important relationship between personal troubles, which affect an individual (e.g., being an alcoholic), and social issues, which reflect a problem for the entire society (e.g., alcoholism) (Mills, 1959). This distinction is a critical component of sociology, because it enables us to see the general in the particular (Berger, 1963). Sociologists study patterns of behavior in order to draw general conclusions about a social issue that transcend the effect of the problem or issue on any particular individual. For example, although alcoholism may have devastating consequences for the alcoholic and his or her immediate family, sociology focuses on the larger problem of alcoholism and its impact on society. This broader sociological focus may include cross-cultural values and attitudes toward alcohol consumption, alcohol use and abuse on college campuses, drinking and driving, the differences and similarities between

**TABLE 1.1**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>All social and behavioral sciences focus on the behavior of people and attempt to explain, at least to some extent, what they do, how they do it, and why they do it. Yet each discipline has a different emphasis and primary focus that sets it apart from the others.</th>
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<td><strong>Sociology</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Social Work</strong></td>
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Where did I go wrong? I could have been almost anything—a jet pilot, skydiver, firefighter, surgeon—you name it, I could have done it. So how did I end up a sociologist? Bad genes? Bad instincts? Bad choices? Or just bad timing? Oh, yes; now I remember. It was the fall of my freshman year, and I took that general education class, Sociology 101, Principles of Sociology.

I tried not to like the class. After all, my choice of major had changed from history to physical education to premed and back to history. I knew where I was headed and resented a college curriculum that forced me to waste my time on “useless” subjects such as the humanities, fine arts, and social and behavioral sciences. I would complete my history major and physical education minor, complete teacher certification requirements, and teach high school history and coach baseball like my high school idol had done.

Then came Sociology 101. The teacher obviously knew her subject—and loved it. Here was a class that acknowledged the social world in which I lived. The country was torn by racial tension, and we were reading and discussing Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice; the Vietnam War orchestrated by the American military-industrial complex was tearing the nation apart, and we were reading and discussing C. Wright Mills’s The Power Elite; and finally, I was searching for my academic niche, and we were reading and discussing Peter Berger’s Invitation to Sociology. That was it; I was hooked. In sociology there was something I could embrace—something I could live.

In his Invitation to Sociology, Berger describes a sociologist as a person intensively, endlessly, shamelessly interested in the doings of [people]… naturally . . . interested in the events that engage people’s ultimate beliefs, their moments of tragedy and grandeur and ecstasy. But he [or she] will also be fascinated by the commonplace, the everyday… [The sociologist] is the [person] who must listen to gossip . . . who is tempted to look through keyholes, to read other people’s mail. (1963:18–19)

And he warns that people who like to avoid shocking discoveries, who prefer to believe that society is just what they were taught in Sunday School, who like “… the world-taken-for-granted, should stay away from sociology” (Berger, 1963:24).

In some ways I had always been a sociologist at heart; I simply lacked the academic training. I had never been able to walk past a closed door without wondering what was behind it. People fascinated me, and I delighted in watching them interact. The rest of my undergraduate years sped by. I took more than the required number of sociology courses for my major—in fact, I took all that my small school offered.

Even though I took a few detours along the way, which included teaching high school social studies (and even coaching a little baseball), my goal was a Ph.D. in sociology. During my doctoral studies and after receiving the degree, I actively pursued the role of sociologist—teaching, researching, writing, and publishing.

My passion for sociology sometimes annoys those around me as they realize that I am always plying the crafts of my trade. Whether at a wedding, funeral, party, or faculty meeting, I am always observing, analyzing, and interpreting human social interaction. My research has covered everything from playing the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus in shopping malls to hanging cows’ tongues on the “kill floor” of a beef processing plant. My enthusiasm is infectious, and I delight in seeing friends, colleagues, and students become interested and sometimes excited when I share my research findings with them.

One Christmas my wife gave me a coffee mug. On one side of the mug is the phrase “Success is doing what you love”; on the other side is “Success is loving what you do.” I am a success.

Sociology is not for everyone. If you have no curiosity about the social world in which you live, you will find little satisfaction in sociology. However, if the investigation of the subjects of sociology—family, school, religion, politics, economics, crime, delinquency, prostitution, urbanization, gender roles, health care, aging, terrorism, war, and peace—intrigues you, you too might want to reflect on becoming a sociologist.

alcoholism and other forms of drug abuse, and other sociological issues. This is not to say that sociologists are unconcerned about individuals and their lives, but sociology’s emphasis is on the way individuals relate to others, peoples’ positions in society, and the interdependence between society and individuals.

**Making Generalizations While Avoiding Stereotypes** As noted in the example of alcoholism, one goal of sociologists is to identify and understand general patterns of social behavior by studying the actions of specific individuals and groups. As a result
of sociological studies, we know that nationality, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, political preference, religion, and a host of other social factors greatly affect our viewpoints and actions. For example, as we discuss in Chapter 16, African Americans, women, the elderly, and labor union members are more likely to vote for Democrats than Republicans in national elections. In making generalizations, however, we must be careful not to fall prey to overgeneralizations and inaccurate stereotypes (oversimplified ideas about a group) that can seriously distort our thinking and cloud our understanding. Consider some of the ways we think about and act toward people based on their race, age, sex, social class, and other characteristics and how these thoughts and actions can be potentially damaging, and even dangerous. Many of our stereotypes come from the mass media, especially television. Throughout this book we illustrate how to examine the media more critically from a sociological perspective. Stereotypes also come from our myopic view of the world. The sociological imagination and locating individuals in a larger social context require that we understand that we live in a global society.

Understanding Life in a Global Society

One of the most significant social consequences of the twentieth century was the transformation of a world of separate nation-states with unique histories, cultures, and social experiences into a massive global village. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan led a Spanish expedition that was the first to circumnavigate the globe. The treacherous journey took approximately 3 years. Today, ships can make the same journey in less than a week and airplanes in less than 24 hours; communication satellites orbit the earth in less than 2 hours and send electronic signals around the world in seconds.

The world has changed, and understanding the nature of these changes is essential for developing a sociological understanding of our lives and the world around us. Nowhere is that change more apparent and powerful than in our ability to communicate information, transport people, and move huge sums of capital around the globe quickly. **Globalization** refers to the interconnectedness among people around the world. It is a “process whereby goods, information, people, money, communication, fashion (and other forms of culture) move across national boundaries (Eitzen and Baca Zinn, 2009:1). Technological advances in communication, transportation, importation, and exportation have rendered the ideology and policies of **social isolationism** not only ridiculous, but also impossible. As one sociologist noted, globalization changes everything: “some social things may be reshaped or threatened . . . they can’t any longer be taken for granted” (Lemert, 2008:181).

Look around you. Two of the most popular brands of Japanese automobiles, Toyota and Honda, are manufactured in Ohio and Kentucky, while many General Motors cars are made from parts manufactured in Mexico and Canada. The best-selling American athletic shoes, Nike, are headquartered in Oregon but made in China and Indonesia. Reebok shoes bear the symbol of the British flag but are manufactured in China and Indonesia. Designer clothes with European labels are made in Central and South America, as are some of the least expensive brands sold under American labels in huge discount stores in the United States.

The recognition that we live in a global society is an integral part of thinking sociologically and developing our sociological imaginations; that is, understanding ourselves in a larger social context. Throughout this book we focus on the global aspects of the issue under study and draw on a wealth of studies and examples from around the world. Global awareness also helps us to question cultural misconceptions and media stereotypes about people who live in countries with cultures very different from our own. It accentuates diversity and helps us challenge views that our particular way of doing things is the only way, or even the best way, of doing them.
Recognizing Diversity

Imagine a world where everybody is exactly the same: everyone looks alike, acts alike, talks alike, and thinks alike. What a simple and uninteresting world it would be. Although it may sometimes be comforting to be around people with similar backgrounds and interests, the world is far more complex than that. We live in a world where variety is indeed the “spice of life.” Globalization has increased mobility, providing in many places a social mosaic of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, religions, and cultures.

How does this diversity affect you and me? It requires that we look at ourselves and the world in which we live a bit differently. Sociological research indicates that although most Americans acknowledge the importance of diversity, their popular conceptions of it are ambiguous and reflect “political correctness” more than understanding (Bell and Hartmann, 2007). We must realize that complex social issues cannot be viewed in simple terms of right or wrong, black or white, and good or evil, but require that we understand and consider other values, points of view, and ways of life that may be dramatically different from our own.

Just as sociology makes generalizations about how common powerful social forces act on all of us, it also recognizes the importance of diversity for understanding social interaction and human society. Throughout this book we underscore the diversity of society by focusing on research and examples that include people from both sexes, the entire range of gender roles, a wide variety of racial and ethnic groups, diverse sexual orientations, different levels of physical and mental abilities, and representatives from diverse national, cultural, religious, and political affiliations, as well as all social classes.

As noted, sociologists are interested in how variables such as age, race, sex, and social class, as well as a host of other social characteristics, influence social interaction and shape the society in which we live. These and other aspects of social diversity are at the heart of the sociological enterprise. This appreciation for diversity quashes numerous misconceptions and stereotypes about various categories and groups of people and leads us to question many aspects of social life often taken for granted. Questioning “commonsense” understandings is at the heart of sociology and sociological thinking.

Sociology and Critical Thinking

Thinking sociologically is a form of critical thinking that involves objectively assessing ideas, statements, and information. It entails defining problems, looking beneath the surface of commonly held ideas, questioning assumptions, logically and systematically analyzing evidence, recognizing biases, avoiding emotional knee-jerk reactions to issues and arguments, forming reasonable solutions to problems, and developing tolerance for a certain amount of uncertainty and ambiguity (Ruggiero, 2007). Simply put, sociological thinking involves asking questions and questioning answers. It requires taking a closer look at our social world.

Taking a Closer Look: Things Are Not Necessarily What They Seem

The subject of sociology is people and what they do in groups, organizations, and societies—subject matter familiar to all of us. Unfortunately, much of our understanding of the social world is very individualized and limited to personal experience, hearsay, and our preconceived notions about the way we think things are and the way we might want them to be. Sociology looks beyond the commonly accepted understandings of human social action to discover different levels of meaning that may be hidden from the consciousness of everyday life. It may even require a bit of suspicion and skepticism about the way human events are interpreted both personally and officially.
This sometimes creates a problem for sociologists. If they study a commonly experienced social institution such as the family, for example, and find that children tend to adopt the religious and political views of their parents, many people respond with a resounding “So what? Everybody knows that.” However, if sociological findings contradict a commonly held assumption—for example, that child molestation is more likely to be perpetrated by a family member or a close friend of the family than by a stranger—they are likely to be met with skepticism, disbelief, or even anger. As one sociologist noted, applying the sociological imagination may make you “a rude, improper guest who crashes someone else’s well-planned party” (Lemert, 2008:215).

This “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” dilemma is faced by virtually all who undertake the sociological enterprise. The study of sociology does not require that we abandon our values, thoughts, ideas, and accumulated knowledge, but it does necessitate being open-minded and tolerant of values, thoughts, ideas, knowledge, and experiences that may be dramatically different from our own. This allows us to see the strange in the familiar—an important aspect of thinking sociologically. This is not to say that sociologists are interested only in the bizarre or sensational aspects of human life. Quite the contrary. The sociologist is as interested in the priest as in the thief, in the hero as in the mass murderer, in the executioner as in the death row inmate (Berger, 1963). But when we study these people and their roles sociologically—that is, systematically and scientifically—we find that many of our preconceived notions are inaccurate and that much of what passes for common sense is nothing more than common nonsense (see Sociological Focus 1.2 for examples). Sociology differs from everyday observation because it uses systematic, scientific methods to obtain information for research and study. Sociological thinking requires looking beneath the surface to question what we think we already know about people and their roles in society. When we do this, more often than not we find that things are not necessarily what they seem.

Analyzing assumptions and challenging personal experiences can be quite unsettling; sociology often raises more questions than it answers. Those who demand concrete answers and absolute certainties may become frustrated with sociology. Those who enjoy the search for elusive answers to the riddles of social life, however, will find sociology very appealing.

Sociological thinking also demands that we look beyond commonsense assumptions, media portrayals, and official data to assess critically how such information is reported, collected, and interpreted. Any attempt to think sociologically about contemporary society must include a focus on mass media and the new information technologies (or “technomedia”). These media not only reflect our society, but also play an important role in shaping and defining it. Now more than ever we need the critical-thinking skills of sociology to analyze the “lies, distortions, and calculated fantasies” that have become part of “the normal content of mass communication” (Connell, 2000:214). One sociological study of television talk shows concluded:

A decade of the “confrontational” contemporary television talk show has provided, however unintentionally, an ideal laboratory for the study of “the social construction of reality.”
It’s surprising how many ideas that seem to make sense are actually wrong. Sociologists have found that many widely held beliefs about the world, other people, and even ourselves are based on preconception, not fact.

When sociologists take a look beneath the surface of our taken-for-granted world, we find that much of what passes for “commonsense” understandings in our society is nothing more than common nonsense. This box provides a few examples and points to chapters in the book where more information on these topics can be found.

Common (Non)Sense: The larger a researcher’s sample, the more accurately findings can be generalized to the population.

Fact: Representativeness is far more important than size for accurate sampling. Samples of 100 to 200 carefully selected subjects are better than 1,000 to 2,000 selected haphazardly (see Chapter 2).

Common (Non)Sense: An individual’s personality is fully determined by age 6 and remains relatively unchanged as he or she becomes an adult.

Fact: Even as adults, individuals have multiple selves that change through the process of socialization according to social situations and cultural expectations (see Chapter 4).

Common (Non)Sense: Following the adage that “Two heads are better than one,” the more people in a group, the better decisions that group is likely to make, because more alternatives will be considered.

Fact: Groups often become subject to groupthink, where the strong desire for consensus and group harmony causes members to ignore alternative solutions and go along with the group (see Chapter 6).

Common (Non)Sense: The majority of people on welfare are members of minorities who have been on welfare for generations and are too lazy to get a job.

Fact: The largest category of welfare recipients are female heads of households with young children, and most of them have been on welfare for less than 2 years (see Chapter 8).

Common (Non)Sense: Prejudiced people discriminate against members of minority groups; nonprejudiced people do not.

Fact: In some circumstances, because of peer pressure, expediency, and other social factors, nonprejudiced people may practice discrimination and prejudiced people may refrain from it (see Chapter 10).

Common (Non)Sense: The majority of people in the United States over age 65 live in nursing homes.

Fact: Less than 5 percent of the elderly in the United States live in nursing homes today, and less than 10 percent will ever live in a nursing home (see Chapter 12).

Common (Non)Sense: The United States provides equal educational opportunities for everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

Fact: Members of racial and ethnic minorities and the poor still suffer from unequal and inadequate educational opportunities in many parts of the United States (see Chapter 14).

Common (Non)Sense: In national elections in the United States, most voters vote, and winning candidates are elected by a majority of voters.

Fact: Often fewer than half of registered voters vote in national elections; although winners receive a majority of votes cast, they are usually elected by a minority of eligible voters and sometimes even by a minority of those who cast votes, as was the case in the 2000 Presidential election (see Chapter 16).

Common (Non)Sense: In the United States, adequate health care is available to any person who needs it.

Fact: The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world that does not provide a national health insurance system for all of its citizens. Millions of Americans have no health insurance and cannot afford even the most basic medical care (see Chapter 18).

Common (Non)Sense: Social movements and revolutions are most likely to occur in poverty-stricken nations where people have little or no hope for peaceful social change.

Fact: Social movements and revolutions are far more common in relatively affluent societies where social situations seem to be improving and people see prospects for a better life (see Chapter 20).

Why are so many “commonsense” notions perpetuated despite social scientific evidence to the contrary? How can critical thinking and a sociological imagination help us analyze commonsense assumptions and distinguish them from common nonsense?
of reality... Since it is already well documented that Americans get most of their “information” from television... it seems that sociology could well use its unique conceptual framework to help the public “see through” the talk shows and similar media messages. (Abt and Seesholtz, 1997:4)

Taking a Closer Look at the Mass Media

The critical-thinking characteristic of sociology is especially useful in evaluating the mass media, because of their profound impact on virtually every aspect of social life. By mass media, we mean forms of communication that transmit standardized messages to widespread audiences, including newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television, and motion pictures. Communications expert Wilson Dizard (1997) refers to these as the “old media”; combined with the new technomedia, they constitute one of the most powerful social influences in the world.

Perhaps the first major technological development in creating a powerful mass media occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, when the invention of steam-powered printing presses led to widespread distribution of affordable newspapers, magazines, and books. Literacy rates increased dramatically, news and information traveled much more rapidly and reached much greater audiences, and for the first time ordinary people turned to reading as a source of information and entertainment.

The second significant technological advancement occurred with the introduction of radio broadcasting in 1920 and television in 1939. From 1920 to the early 1950s, the radio was a centerpiece in almost every American home and served as a primary source of news and entertainment. When the Pioneer Corporation introduced television sets to America with the words “We bring the revolution home,” many doubted that television could ever replace the popular medium of radio. In 1946, motion picture mogul Darryl F. Zanuck of Twentieth Century Fox declared that television would never be successful because people would tire of staring at a plywood box every night.

Today, almost every American home has at least one television set; the average home has between two and three sets (see Table 1.2). Studies reveal that children spend as many as 40 hours per week viewing television. Adults are also ardent television viewers; it has been estimated that they spend between one-fourth and one-third of their lives in front of a television set (see Figure 1.1). One sociological study linked watching television to people’s moods and outlook on life, indicating that happy people watch less television and unhappy people watch more, although it was impossible to determine if being unhappy caused people to watch more television or if watching more television made people unhappy (Robinson and Martin, 2008). Through the use of satellites and other communication technology, television literally links every portion of the globe into one mass-mediated society.

Sociological analysis can help us understand that although society has a tremendous impact on the mass media, the media—especially television—not only reflect the society but also exert tremendous influence in shaping it. The media influence social and political agendas by deciding what tiny bit of a tremendous amount of information is important. Moreover, when people have not experienced an event firsthand, media reports often constitute their “first draft of reality” (Graber, 1993:21). For some, it may also constitute their final draft. It can be argued that mass media, especially television, may in fact be the most powerful social force in American

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Television Sets in Homes (in Millions)</th>
<th>Percentage of Households with Television Sets</th>
<th>Number of Television Sets per Household</th>
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<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>45.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>301.0</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

society today—and perhaps in the world, because it now reaches even the most remote areas of the globe.

Several key media formats serve to filter what we see, read, and hear. First and foremost, media presentations, including those of “serious information,” such as the evening news, must be entertaining to attract viewers. For example, there appears to be little difference between stories aired by the major networks on the nightly news and those shown on popular television programs such as *Inside Edition* and *Extra*. Second, information must be packaged and presented within severe time constraints. After the time devoted to commercials, for example, the evening news has 23 minutes to convey the day’s most important events. Usually each major story gets 2 minutes or less; stories that might take more than 3 minutes are considered too long for network news and more appropriate for documentaries. Thus, if the media act as a mirror, they are a clouded and distorted mirror at best.

As a consequence of these and other agendas and formats, media presentations almost always emphasize (1) personal over social issues; (2) emotional over intellectual issues; (3) concrete over abstract events; and (4) dynamic and fast-paced stories over “talking heads” and thought-provoking pieces. The media rarely display a sociological imagination; instead, they personalize issues by using the most sensational, emotional, and extreme examples possible.

Although the traditional mass media, especially television, are still among the most powerful and pervasive forms of media today, we are bombarded with new forms of information technology that greatly influence our individual lives and that are changing the world around us. Whereas communication and the exchange of information were once limited to face-to-face interactions or more standardized and structured channels, today we can access a wealth of information and data almost instantaneously and communicate with people around the globe. We define technomedia as the newer and more personalized information technologies, including personal computers, on-demand and interactive television, CD-ROMs, MP3 players, fax machines, videogame systems, handheld databanks and other electronic devices, smartphones, the Internet, and fiber-optic communications—what Dizard (1997) called the “new media”—and much more.

The technomedia are of particular interest to sociologists because they combine elements of both the “old” and “new” media. *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and a host of other major magazines and newspapers, as well as the networks ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, and CNN, are fully accessible on the World Wide Web; the so-called new media now include all the major players from traditional mass media. Many Americans use the Web as their primary news source, and research shows that despite access to more information, they are woefully ill-informed (di Justo, 2007).

Sociologists are interested in technomedia for other reasons as well. Although computers and other electronic media appear to have a unifying effect on society by making communication and social interaction faster and easier than ever before, they also illustrate that things are not necessarily what they seem. The technomedia combine all the aspects of traditional mass media—print, sound, and video—but rather than sending standardized messages to massive audiences, technomedia are interactive and...
aimed at providing much more personalized services to smaller groups and individuals. Or, as one media expert asserted: television is the primary medium for *broadcasting*, but the Internet is the ultimate in *narrowcasting*, offering websites and chat groups that appeal to the particular interests of individual users (Sandberg, 1996). In 1998, almost half of all white homes had computers (44.9%), but less than one-third (29.0%) of African American households were equipped with computers—a phenomenon dubbed “the racial divide on the information highway” (Harmon, 1998:A1), or what sociologists refer to as the *digital divide*. That gap narrowed somewhat a year later, as 36 percent of African Americans gained access to the Internet (Goldstein, 2000). The fastest-growing category of computer and Internet users, however, is youth ages 10 through 18; because of their ease with technology, experts predict that this age group may soon become the major users of all technomedia. Already, the World Wide Web is replacing books for teenagers (*New York Times*, 2008a).

In 1949, the magazine *Popular Mechanics* predicted that sometime in the future computers might weigh as little as 1.5 tons, making them more practical for use in business and industry. Today, most laptop computers are no larger than a purse or small briefcase, and handheld calculators and smartphones are as small and lightweight as a credit card. It took radio 15 years to penetrate 25 percent of American households; television did it in only 7 years; the Internet took less than 3 years (CBS News, 1999). It is estimated that nearly 1.5 billion households around the world are wired for Internet access (two-thirds of that number in the United States and Canada alone) (see Figure 1.2). Of greater sociological interest than these figures is the fact that different racial, age, gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups have differential access to and use patterns of technomedia (Goldstein, 2000; Ono and Zavodny, 2008). Moreover, today’s technomedia users are not confined to offices, homes, desktops, or laptops. Rather, they are “on the go” users with handheld devices—most notably multiple-use cell phones, or smartphones—that are less expensive and easier to use than desktop computers. This has opened up the virtual world to demographic groups

*FIGURE 1.2*  
Internet Users in the World by Geographic Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Millions of Users</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Population for Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>784.2</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>402.4</td>
<td>50.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>251.7</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America/Caribbean</td>
<td>175.8</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceanian/Australia</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>60.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that previously lagged behind in computer and Internet usage, such as teenagers, Hispanics, African Americans, and senior citizens (Horrigan, 2008).

Online chat rooms, virtual communities, Internet dating, 3D virtual worlds, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, and other interactive venues are so commonplace that they have become a primary source of social interaction and networking, especially among teenagers and young adults. Social norms have arisen in chat rooms, virtual communities, and other online venues, creating what some have dubbed as “cyber civility” and “netiquette” (Minerd, 2000; Strawbridge, 2007).

Unlike the traditional mass media, which were phased into society slowly, new forms of technomedia burst onto the scene almost daily. They have certainly changed people’s lives in terms of activities, if not also in substance and content (May, 2002). New media technologies permeate every aspect of society and have become embedded in our very social fabric (Howard and Jones, 2004). Moreover, unlike many of the older forms of mass media, much of the new technomedia is relatively unregulated. Today, anybody who secures a website can disseminate research findings and data or express opinions as facts, with virtually no checks or restraints. These rapid technological developments pose some interesting sociological questions. For example:

- How has society changed now that daily newspapers and weekly magazines can be instantly accessed along with other online news and information services?
- What will be the social impact if traditional publishing companies, books, and libraries disappear in the wake of desktop publishing, CD-ROM, e-books, and online information services?
- How will television viewing change if networks and cable systems cannot compete with interactive television, personalized video, and online entertainment options?
- What are the First Amendment issues related to regulation of the Internet and other forms of technomedia? How will we resolve these issues?
- What are the social implications of online chat rooms and virtual communities? How will they alter our understanding of communication and social interaction?
- Do the mass media and technomedia provide us with access to too much information? If so, what are the sociological implications of this information overload? Or, do the mass media and technomedia provide too little information as they edit and package news and information into brief capsules?
- How will interaction over the Internet alter the importance of race, age, sex, and social class?
- Is interaction in cyberspace social interaction?

These questions call attention to the need for sociological analysis of the mass media and technomedia. This is true today and will be even more important in the future as we attempt to select, interpret, and understand the media and their impact on society.

In each chapter of this book, we take a sociological look at the influence of the traditional mass media and technomedia as they relate to the topic covered in that chapter. This is neither an exercise in the popular sport of “media bashing” nor an attempt to promote mass media or technomedia. Rather, it is designed to help you sharpen your sociological imagination and critical-thinking skills in order to better decipher, analyze, and understand the countless messages you receive every day as well as to realize how modern information technologies affect individuals and society. This involves thinking sociologically, looking beneath the surface, questioning the official view, and critically analyzing what is commonly taken for granted—activities that have been at the heart of sociology since its inception.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Writings of philosophers, poets, and religious leaders of the ancient civilizations of Babylon, Egypt, India, and other parts of the world reflect substantial interest in
The use of observation, comparison, experimentation, and the historical method to analyze society.

The Changing Social Climate: The Industrial Revolution

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, European society was characterized by a feudal system consisting of wealthy landowners (lords), who owned huge manors, and large numbers of peasants (serfs), who tilled the land and were thus economically tied to the lords and their manors for subsistence. As the lords died, were displaced, or drove one another off their lands, the manors were divided into small farms tilled by their new owners and their families, and small villages with an emerging merchant class developed as important economic centers and social communities.

One of the driving forces that led to the development of sociology in Europe was the dramatic social upheaval linked to the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. With the advent of new technology, especially steam-driven machines, factories developed, luring people from small villages and the less productive farms to more centralized locations to work for the new factory owners. Thus industrialization, the transformation from a predominantly agriculture-based economy to a manufacturing one, was accompanied by rapid urbanization, the growth of large cities. These two factors were accompanied by massive waves of immigration, as increased mobility encouraged people to cross political borders to escape oppressive conditions or pursue perceived opportunities elsewhere.

New problems emerged, such as inadequate housing; inordinate wealth beside abject poverty; crime; air, water, and noise pollution; and disease. Moreover, wherever industrialization, urbanization, and immigration have occurred, they have been linked to enhanced political awareness and demands for greater political, economic, and social participation. Consequently, nineteenth-century Europeans experiencing dramatic social upheaval sought explanations for, and workable solutions to, the day-to-day problems they were experiencing.

The Changing Intellectual Climate: The Rise of Science

Scholars often describe the eighteenth century as the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment, because during this time Western culture emerged into a new era of social thought. Over several centuries, and as a result of much struggle, the dominant way of explaining social events shifted from theological to scientific. Rather than attribute human behavior and social conditions to supernatural forces, people searched for logical, rational, and cause-and-effect explanations. As a result, universities replaced the church as the primary source of knowledge.

Early European Sociology

The works of several nineteenth-century scholars provided the foundation for contemporary sociology. One of the first was Auguste Comte, often credited with being the founder of sociology.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) Auguste Comte grew up in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Observing the social turmoil of his native country, he believed that the new scientific approach to problem solving that was sweeping Europe might also be applied to the study of society. He coined the term sociology and wrote Positive Philosophy, the first systematic sociological approach to the study of society. Comte’s new science emphasized positivism, the use of observation, comparison, experimentation, and the historical method to analyze society. Comte also identified two
Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the term sociology and launched the positivistic approach to the study of sociology.

Why is Comte considered the “founder” of the discipline of sociology?

Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) grew up in England. In 1853, she translated Comte’s six-volume Positive Philosophy into English and condensed it into two volumes, thus introducing sociology to England (Webb, 1960). Martineau made her own contribution to sociology with Society in America, one of the first and most thorough sociological treatises on American social life and one of the first to compare the system of social stratification in Europe to that in America. She took sociology from the realm of ideas to the arena of practice in How to Observe Manners and Morals, published in 1838 and one of the first books to focus on sociological research methods. Although Martineau introduced sociology to England, it was Herbert Spencer’s controversial application of sociology that gained attention and support from wealthy industrialists and government officials in England and throughout Europe.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) observed the negative aspects of the Industrial Revolution in England—the struggle, competition, and violence. Herbert Spencer developed a theoretical approach to understanding society that relied on evolutionary doctrine. To explain both social structure and social changes, he used an organic analogy that compared society to a living organism made up of interdependent parts—ideas that ultimately contributed to the structural functionalist perspective in sociology. Using the phrase “survival of the fittest” even before Charles Darwin’s landmark On the Origin of Species ([1859] 1964) was published, Spencer’s social Darwinism concluded that the evolution of society and the survival of those within it were directly linked to their ability to adapt to changing conditions. According to Spencer, a free and competitive marketplace without governmental interference was essential so that the best and the brightest would succeed and, in turn, help build a stronger economy and society. Spencer opposed welfare or any other means of helping the weak or the poor, believing that such efforts would weaken society in the long term by helping the “unfit” to survive. These ideas appealed to wealthy industrialists and government officials, who used Spencer’s theory to scientifically support policies and practices that helped them maintain their wealth, power, and prestige at the expense of those less fortunate.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was trained in history, economics, and philosophy, but his ideas reflect sociological thinking. Observing the same social conditions as Spencer, he drew very different conclusions about their origins. Marx declared that the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and other limited resources in society was not the result of “natural laws,” but was caused by social forces—specifically, the exploitation of one social class by another. He insisted that social structure and the political and economic institutions that people took for granted were not the result of natural evolution or social consensus but reflected the opposed interests of different social classes.

Marx believed that society consisted of two basic social classes: the “haves” and the “have-nots.” According to Marx’s viewpoint, the bourgeoisie (haves), the powerful ruling class, had assumed power not because they were the “fittest,” but because they owned and controlled the means of production. He believed the bourgeoisie used deception, fraud, and violence to usurp the production of the proletariat (have-nots), or working class, whose labor created most of society’s goods—and hence, its profits.

Major areas of study for sociologists: social statics, which focuses on social structure, or the relatively stable elements found in every society, and social dynamics, which focuses on social change. These two areas remain part of the primary focus of contemporary sociology, and they contributed to the development of the structural functionalist perspective introduced later in this chapter and applied throughout the book.

Comte envisioned sociology as being much more than an intellectual enterprise. He dreamed of a utopian society fine-tuned by social engineers (sociologists) who would apply sociological knowledge to cure society’s ills. In his later years, his devotion to sociology became so intense that he envisioned it almost as a religion, with sociologists the “high priests of positivism.” Although later sociologists tempered Comte’s idealistic and zealous vision, most continue to believe in sociology’s promise as a vehicle for positive social change.

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Marx was not a detached social observer but an outspoken social critic. He concluded that a slow, natural evolutionary process would not bring about necessary social changes. Rather, his analysis called for a major social revolution in which the proletariat would rise up, forcibly overthrow the bourgeoisie, and form a new, classless society. In such a society, Marx wrote, everyone would contribute according to his or her abilities and receive from society based on need. Marx’s contributions to sociological understanding provided the foundation for the conflict perspective in sociology, discussed later in this chapter and throughout the book. Marx’s focus on social conflict was unsettling to many—especially those whom he described as the bourgeoisie. They were relieved when Émile Durkheim’s more palatable social analysis emerged and shifted the focus of sociology back to a more conservative approach called functionalism.

**Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)** Unlike Marx, who focused on social conflict, French sociologist Émile Durkheim was primarily concerned with social order. He believed that social solidarity, or the social bonds developed by individuals to their society, created social order. Durkheim believed that social solidarity could be categorized into two types: *mechanical solidarity*, the type found in simple rural societies based on tradition and unity, and *organic solidarity*, which was found in urban societies and was based more on a complex division of labor and formal organizations.

One of Durkheim’s most important contributions to sociology was his study *Suicide* ([1897] 1951), which demonstrated that abstract sociological theories can be applied to a very real social problem. More important, it showed that suicide, believed to be a private, individualized, and personal act, can best be explained from a sociological viewpoint. By looking at suicide rates instead of individual suicides, Durkheim linked suicide to *social integration*—the extent to which individuals feel they are a meaningful part of society. Those with the strongest social bonds are less likely to commit suicide than those who are less meaningfully integrated and have weaker social bonds. For example, his data demonstrated that married people had lower suicide rates than those who were single or divorced; people in the workforce had lower rates than those who were unemployed; and church members had lower rates than nonmembers. Moreover, those religions that promote the strongest social bonds among their members (e.g., Catholicism and Judaism) had much lower suicide rates than less structured religions (e.g., Protestantism). Today, over a century later, these patterns in suicide, and others discerned by Durkheim’s early study, still persist.

**Max Weber (1864–1920)** Max Weber, a contemporary of Durkheim, was concerned that many sociologists, especially his fellow German, Karl Marx, allowed their personal values to influence their theories and research. Weber insisted that sociologists should be value-free—analyzing what society is, rather than what they think it should be. Weber did not advocate a cold, impersonal approach to sociology, however; he argued that understanding the meaning of social interaction requires *Verstehen*, an empathetic and introspective analysis of the interaction. In other words, Weber believed that researchers should avoid their personal biases and put themselves in the place of those they study, to understand better how they experience the world and society’s impact on them.

One of Weber’s most important contributions to sociology was his concept of the *ideal type*, a conceptual model or typology constructed from the direct observation of a number of specific cases and representing the essential qualities found in those cases. By ideal type, Weber was referring to a generalization based on many specific examples, not implying that something was necessarily desirable. For example, Weber used bureaucracy as an ideal type to analyze and explain the increasing rationalization and depersonalization that is part of formal organizations. Weber contended that to maximize efficiency, formal organizations, such as private businesses, educational institutions, and governmental agencies, had become and would continue to become increasingly bureaucratic. Although Weber contended that bureaucracy as an ideal type represented the most rational and efficient organizational strategy, he also warned of its depersonalizing and dehumanizing aspects.

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**IDEAL TYPE**
A conceptual model or typology constructed from the direct observation of a number of specific cases and representing the essential qualities found in those cases.
Sociology Crosses the Atlantic

As in Europe, the onset of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and accompanying social problems, gave impetus to the development of sociology in the United States. American sociologists built on and expanded the theories and ideas of the European founders of sociology.

Lester F. Ward (1841–1913)  
Lester Ward is often considered the first systematic American sociologist. He attempted to synthesize the major theoretical ideas of Comte and Spencer and differentiated between what he called pure sociology—the study of society in an effort to understand and explain the natural laws that govern its evolution—and applied sociology, which uses sociological principles, social ideals, and ethical considerations to improve society. The distinctions between these two areas of sociology are still made today.

Jane Addams (1860–1935)  
Although not a sociologist, Jane Addams practiced applied sociology and put sociological theory to work when she established the famous Hull House in Chicago in 1889 to aid the poor and homeless. One of the founders of American social work, in 1931 Addams’ devotion to applied sociology and social activism earned her a Nobel Prize.

Margaret Sanger (1883–1966)  
Another notable social reformer, Margaret Sanger applied sociological theories to problems of population, health, and women’s rights. After watching a poor working woman die from a self-induced abortion, she began publishing Woman Rebel, a journal aimed at raising the consciousness of working-class women. Her articles covered topics ranging from personal hygiene, venereal disease, and birth control to social revolution.

William E. B. DuBois (1868–1963)  
William E. B. DuBois earned his doctorate from Harvard and pursued postgraduate study in sociology, history, and economics at the University of Berlin, where he studied under Max Weber. After returning to the United States, DuBois applied Weber’s methodological technique of Verstehen to sociological studies of blacks in the United States. He is considered the founder of “Afro-American sociology.” DuBois was also one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where he applied his theories, empirical research, and sociological imagination to empower African Americans to achieve social justice and equality in the United States.

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY

Sociology came of age in America during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—a period of radical social change that included the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and World War II. During that period, some of the most prominent sociologists and social psychologists of the twentieth century were either faculty members or students in the first sociology department in the United States, at the University of Chicago. They used Chicago as a dynamic sociological laboratory to observe and analyze the social impact of urbanization and industrialization.

The theoretical and methodological contributions of these scholars became known as the Chicago School, and provided sociology with symbolic interactionism, one of the three major theoretical perspectives—a viewpoint or particular way of looking at things—that dominate sociology today. The other two are structural functionalism and conflict. These three overriding perspectives serve as paradigms, sets of assumptions and ideas that guide research questions, methods of analysis and interpretation, and the development of theory. Let’s take a brief look at each and compare their relative strengths and weaknesses. Table 1.3 gives a brief comparison of these three perspectives.

The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

The symbolic interactionist perspective views social meaning as arising through the process of social interaction. Contemporary symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises:
1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that they attach to them.

2. These meanings are derived from, or arise out of, social interaction with others.

3. These meanings may be changed or modified through the processes of interaction and interpretation. (Blumer, 1969b:2)

Proponents of this perspective, often referred to as the interactionist perspective, engage in microlevel analysis, which focuses on the day-to-day interactions of individuals and groups in specific social situations. Three major concepts important for understanding this theoretical approach include meaningful symbols, the definition of the situation, and the looking-glass self. In addition, two important types of theoretical analysis fit within the interactionist perspective: dramaturgical analysis and the labeling approach.

Meaningful Symbols George H. Mead (1863–1931) insisted that the ongoing process of social interaction and the creating, defining, and redefining of meaningful symbols make society possible. Meaningful symbols are sounds, objects, colors, and events that represent something other than themselves and are critical for understanding social interaction. Language is one of the most important and powerful meaningful symbols humans have created, because it allows us to communicate through the shared meaning of words.

Definition of the Situation Definition of the situation refers to the idea that “if [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas, 1928:572). Simply put, people define social reality through a process of give-and-take interaction. Once a definition is established, it shapes all further interactions. For example, have you ever decided that you were “in love” with someone? If so, how did that change the way you interacted with that person? Conversely, what happens when a married couple decides they are no longer in love? If they define their marriage as meaningless or decide they have irreconcilable differences, how does that affect their relationship? Is a marriage likely to survive if both partners have defined it as “over”?

The Looking-Glass Self The looking-glass self refers to the idea that an individual’s self-concept is largely a reflection of how he or she is perceived by other members of

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The Looking-Glass Self The looking-glass self refers to the idea that an individual’s self-concept is largely a reflection of how he or she is perceived by other members of
society (Cooley, [1902] 1922). Society is used as a mirror to reflect a feeling of self-pride, self-doubt, self-worth, or self-loathing. These important elements of symbolic interactionism contribute to socialization and the process of becoming human as we establish our personal and social identities.

**Dramaturgical Analysis** A useful theoretical framework within symbolic interactionism, *dramaturgical analysis*, uses the analogy of the theater to analyze social behavior. In this approach, people are viewed as actors occupying roles as they play out life’s drama. In real life, people do not passively accept others’ definitions of the situation nor the social identities assigned to them. Rather, they take an active part in the drama, manipulating the interaction to present themselves in the most positive light. Thus, people often use *impression management* to communicate favorable impressions of themselves (Goffman, 1959).

**The Labeling Approach** Another theoretical viewpoint within symbolic interactionism is the *labeling approach*, which contends that people attach various labels to certain behaviors, individuals, and groups that become part of their social identity and shape others’ attitudes about and responses to them. For example, in *Outsiders*, Howard Becker (1963) explored the fascinating world of jazz musicians and how their nontraditional music, penchant for marijuana, and open racial integration during the 1950s led mainstream Americans to label them “deviant.”

The influence of the Chicago School and symbolic interactionism waned in the late 1950s, when a faction of sociologists argued that its approach was too dependent on ethnographic studies, personal observations, interviews, and subjective interpretations. Insisting that sociology must be more scientific, or at least, as Comte had envisioned, more positivistic, this group believed that sociology should rely more heavily on quantifiable data, facts, figures, and statistics. This led to the development of the Iowa School of symbolic interaction and also fueled a revival of structural functionalism.

**The Iowa School of Symbolic Interaction** Manford H. Kuhn argued that the theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism can be operationalized and applied in more positivistic scientific ways. Although sharing the theoretical assumptions of the Chicago School, the Iowa School sought to lend more scientific credibility to symbolic interaction and its research methods. Meanwhile, the desire to make sociology return to its positivistic roots provided the impetus for Talcott Parsons and others at Harvard University to revive the structural functionalist perspective of early European sociologists.

**The Structural Functionalist Perspective** Heavily influenced by the ideas of Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim, the structural functionalist perspective shifted the focus of sociology from the study of day-to-day social interaction to a *macrolevel analysis*, which examines broader social structures and society as a whole. This perspective emphasizes social structure and order. Often referred to as the functionalist perspective, or functionalism, the *structural functionalist perspective* views society as a system of interdependent and interrelated parts. Within the overall structure of the system, each part fulfills a specific function, which thereby contributes to the overall functioning of the entire system.

The example of an MP3 player illustrates this view. Each component—the MP3 unit, battery, and earbuds—has a specific function to perform so that the system performs its function: the playing of music. If any component fails to function properly—for example, if one of the earbuds doesn’t work—the entire system fails to function properly. It is then necessary to isolate and identify the problem (in this case, a bad earbud) and repair or replace it. Once the problem with the earbud is fixed, the MP3 player resumes its normal functioning. An emergency room in a contemporary hospital serves as a more human example, where doctors, nurses, technicians, and other specialists work together as a team, each performing specific tasks, in an effort to save a patient’s life.
Social Structure  The structural functionalist perspective contends that society has a *structure* consisting of a variety of important components—for example, basic social institutions such as the family, religion, education, politics, and the economy. These institutions are interrelated and interdependent. Each performs an important *function* contributing to the overall structure of society. A problem in one area creates a problem for the entire system, and for society to function properly all social institutions must fulfill their basic functions. When all aspects of society are functioning properly, they are in a state of *social equilibrium*, or balance. In addition to the emphasis on structure, three basic concepts of the structural functionalist perspective are manifest functions, latent functions, and dysfunctions.

Manifest and Latent Functions  Contemporary sociologists who use the structural functionalist perspective differentiate between manifest functions, the anticipated or intended consequences of social institutions, and latent functions, the unintended or unrecognized consequences of social institutions. As an example, let’s consider higher education. The obvious manifest function of higher education is to transmit knowledge and prepare students for life in a complex industrial society. Higher education also serves a variety of latent functions. For instance, though usually unacknowledged by administrators, faculty, and students, a college campus provides a setting for meeting a marriage partner.

Dysfunctions  From the functionalist perspective, some aspects of society are viewed as *dysfunctional* because they threaten to disrupt social stability and order. It is important to note that “functional” and “dysfunctional” do not represent value judgments and are not synonymous with “good” and “bad.” Crime can be viewed as dysfunctional in that it threatens social order, hurts people, and costs society a lot of money. But functionalists point out that crime is also functional. For example, laws are reinforced when criminals are caught and punished, and crime creates many jobs in law enforcement and related careers.

An alternative macrolevel analysis of society and human behavior is the conflict perspective. Whereas the structural functionalist perspective focuses on balance, harmony, and cooperation, the conflict perspective sees societal structure as much more diverse and characterized by competition and conflict. The turbulent times of the 1960s and early 1970s revived an interest in the ideas of Karl Marx and gave impetus to the conflict perspective in sociology.

The Conflict Perspective  The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., along with the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and rising crime and poverty rates in major cities, focused renewed attention on the problems of urban-industrial America. The United States was in a state of social upheaval, as were many other countries, and people were seeking answers to sociological questions. Interactionism’s emphasis on microlevel issues and functionalism’s focus on stability and order seemed inadequate. Problems of racism, poverty, crime, and delinquency threatened the very fabric of the society, and their negative consequences were felt around the world.

The conflict perspective views society as composed of diverse groups with conflicting values and interests. In any society, these groups have differential access to wealth, power, and prestige. The most important aspects of the conflict perspective are the Marxian approach, which focuses on economic determinism and the importance of social class, and the neoconflict approach, which focuses on differential power and authority.

The Marxian Approach to Conflict  The theoretical roots of the conflict perspective can be traced to Karl Marx. Often, the values and interests of different groups conflict with one another. According to Marx, these conflicts are determined by economics and are based on social class, and the struggle between the different values and interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is inevitable. When these battles occur, the

MANIFEST FUNCTIONS
Anticipated or intended consequences of social institutions.

LATENT FUNCTIONS
Unintended or unrecognized consequences of social institutions.

CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE
Views society as composed of diverse groups with conflicting values and interests.
dominant group attempts to force its values and ideology on less powerful groups. The result is the domination and exploitation of the masses (the proletariat) by the rich and powerful members of society (the bourgeoisie). The conflict perspective is not solely Marxist sociology, however; today conflict theorists often take a neoconflict approach.

The Neoconflict Approach Social conflict can be viewed as a necessary and even functional social process. From this perspective, conflict necessitates negotiation and compromise; hence it can produce order and a reaffirmation of the social structure. In a diverse nation like the United States, conflict between racial, ethnic, religious, age, gender, and political groups is inevitable but not necessarily destructive. For example, attempts to balance the national budget have typically been thwarted by bickering over what areas of the budget should be increased and which should be cut. Those dependent on Medicare and Social Security resist cuts to those programs and would rather see cuts in, for example, the defense budget or federal aid to tobacco growers. Meanwhile, Pentagon officials and cigarette manufacturers are not about to sit back and allow legislators to balance the budget at their expense. Both sides employ powerful lobbyists to persuade legislators to vote for their relative interests. These political and ideological quarrels are marked by compromises or trade-offs that may not satisfy either group but also do not allow one interest to totally dominate the other. When society is confronted by an external threat, these internal conflicts may decrease, for, as is often said, nothing unites a group like a common enemy. From this perspective, conflict is dysfunctional only if it threatens one or more of society’s core values (Coser, 1956).

Neconflict theorists also contend that class conflict in industrialized countries is not so much a struggle over the means of production (as Marx argued) but rather a result of the unequal distribution of authority (Dahrendorf, 1959). For example, the differing power and prestige of college professors and students sometimes lead to tension and conflict between the two groups that has nothing to do with the ownership of property or the means of production. This version of the conflict perspective focuses on differences in power and authority and the exploitation of some groups by other, more powerful groups. A good example of this approach can be seen in the work of C. Wright Mills.

C. Wright Mills and the “Power Elite” C. Wright Mills promoted the conflict perspective for analyzing the distribution of power and authority in the United States. In The Power Elite (1956), he contended that post–World War II U.S. society was dominated by a powerful military, industrial, and political elite that shaped foreign and domestic policy for the benefit of the wealthy and powerful class. His approach focused on historical and structural analyses of class conflict and the uses of ideology for domination.

Which Perspective Is Best?
Symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, and the conflict perspective offer very different explanations for society and human behavior. This often prompts students to ask which one is best. However, because each contributes a distinctive interpretation, a more appropriate question might be, how does each theory help us better analyze and understand particular aspects of society or social behavior? By asking this question, we are thinking sociologically and developing our sociological imaginations. To illustrate, let’s look at how each of the three major perspectives might analyze the role of the media in society.

The Functionalist View of the Media From the functionalist perspective, the media perform a host of social functions, first and foremost the dissemination of information and ideas and the provision of almost instantaneous communication around the globe. This function is heightened during times of crisis, such as war, natural disasters,
and social instability. Of course, the media also have dysfunctional consequences, because they may encourage passivity, promote stereotypes, discourage physical activity and critical thinking, and misinform people. Thinking sociologically, how do the media fit into the overall structure of American society? How do the media function to help create a global society? In what ways do the media contribute to social order and stability? In what ways are they dysfunctional?

**The Media and Social Conflict**  From the conflict perspective, the media, especially traditional mass media, are tools of power that help maintain the status quo, cultivate consumers, and disseminate information that serves the vested interests of the wealthy and powerful people and corporations that own or control the media. Sociologists using the conflict perspective point out that despite their egalitarian rhetoric and appeal, the technomedia are disproportionately available to the elite class. What other insights does the conflict perspective offer with regard to the media? Do the media help dissolve and blur class distinctions in the United States and around the world? Or do they accentuate these differences? How do the new technomedia reinforce or alter these class differences?

**The Media from an Interactionist Perspective** Symbolic interactionists point out that the media provide the quickest and most effective methods of “defining the situation” to promote commercial products through mass advertising in newspapers, magazines, radio and television commercials, and over the Internet. Likewise, politicians stage “media events” to popularize their agendas and promote their careers, and every major social movement or activist organization has a website. How do the media help shape the definition of a particular social situation? Do the media unduly influence and shape thinking and social behavior? Or do the media merely reflect one version of social reality?

None of these analyses is entirely correct nor entirely wrong. They are merely three different theoretical approaches to the same topic.

**Feminist Theory: An Example of Combining the Three Perspectives**

Quarrels over which theoretical paradigm is best have been nonproductive. Increasingly, the three dominant paradigms are being linked, integrated, and synthesized to take sociological theory in new directions.

An example of an approach that combines elements of all three of the major perspectives can be found in feminist theory, which *studies, analyzes, and explains social phenomena from a gender-focused perspective*. This approach, used by both women and men, emphasizes the fundamental importance of gender for understanding society and social relationships. Feminist theories reflect and synthesize much of the rich diversity among other theoretical perspectives in sociology (Chafetz, 1997; Beasley, 1999; Delamont, 2003; Tong, 2009). Feminist theory, for example, uses elements of the interactionist perspective to study the ongoing social meanings of gender and to question commonly accepted definitions and symbols of femininity and masculinity. Like functionalists, however, sociologists who use feminist theory also argue that gender is incorporated into the basic social structure of every society. They also study how traditional gender roles and sexism function to maintain the status quo in most societies, yet may be dysfunctional in the way they inhibit some people from achieving their full potential. One of the “hottest” topics among feminist scholars today focuses on “the intersection of race, class, and gender” (Chafetz, 1997:115). Feminist theory is most closely aligned with the conflict perspective, however, especially in the way it draws on the historical and contemporary subordination of women and analyzes differential power and authority and the exploitation of one group by another based on gender. Shifting the focus of sociology away from a male-dominated view of the world, feminist theory has emerged as an important theoretical tool for analyzing all aspects of society, but especially in understanding problems of gender inequality, poverty, domestic abuse, pornography, sexual harassment, and violence.
Thinking Sociologically: Taking an Integrated Approach

Throughout this chapter we have used the phrase thinking sociologically to describe the type of critical thinking we encourage to understand society and the social world. In our view, this type of thinking can be achieved only by taking an integrated approach to sociology that encompasses all three of the major theoretical perspectives, as well as drawing on theories and ideas from numerous other academic disciplines. All three of the major sociological paradigms are valid ways of analyzing society, and alone or in combination they enhance our sociological imaginations and understanding of human social behavior. And, as feminist theory illustrates, elements of the three approaches can be combined to provide a more eclectic understanding of our social world.

Because of different assumptions and approaches, the weaknesses of one perspective are often the strengths of the other two. Also, because of their different approaches to society and human behavior, one perspective may be more helpful than another, depending on what you wish to study.

Although the interactionist perspective provides tremendous insight into the day-to-day, face-to-face interactions of individuals and groups, it has been criticized for somewhat ignoring the constraints of the larger social structure in which this interaction occurs. Meanwhile, whereas the structural functionalist approach corrects that deficiency, its focus on structure, stability, harmony, and equilibrium, along with its emphasis on predictability and “natural laws” that govern society, tends to ignore the importance of diversity and how social variables such as race, ethnicity, and gender may lead to potential tension and conflict among groups. Functionalism also downplays the ability of individual actors to create spontaneously their social realities as they interact with one another. Finally, the conflict perspective emphasizes the struggles for power among various classes and groups of people and helps explain social inequality. Yet it, too, tends to ignore the importance of day-to-day and face-to-face interaction—especially the tremendous amount of daily cooperation and harmony among diverse groups and individuals as they interact. Given these relative strengths and weaknesses, which theoretical perspective might be most helpful in studying small group dynamics, say the workings of a criminal jury or the president’s cabinet? Would that same perspective be as helpful in understanding the breakup of the former Soviet Union, or the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia? How might a more integrated approach that draws from all three perspectives help us better understand all of these?

For the most balanced approach to sociological understanding, and to encourage you to think sociologically, we use all three major theoretical approaches throughout this book. Our goal is to help you develop a strong sociological imagination and encourage sociological thinking, rather than to promote any particular paradigm.

The new millennium sparked widespread public speculation and some concern as to what the future may hold. Sociology was born during a period of rapid social change associated with industrialization, and historically sociologists have taken the lead in analyzing and interpreting social change and its impact on society. The challenge for sociology in the twenty-first century is to avoid complacency and to face the challenge of public conservatism on the one hand and the pressures of “political correctness” on the other. In the twenty-first century, sociology has been plagued by attacks both from the “new know-nothings,” who resist or outright attack science and scientific findings about human behavior because those findings threaten their religious beliefs or their social status and power, and from the “know-it-alls,” who claim far more for their scientific findings than are warranted by their data (Curra and Paolucci, 2008). Both of these social trends have hampered meaningful research and open discussion of sensitive issues such as racial, ethnic, and gender tensions, as well
as serious efforts to study and analyze the powerful influence of mass media and technomedia on society. Avoiding discussion about these sensitive issues supports the status quo, whereas openly talking about them is viewed by some as tantamount to an act of war. Sociologists must use and encourage the critical-thinking approach we have described in this chapter to resolve this dilemma if they are to shed light on these issues in the twenty-first century (Portes, 2000).

There is much disagreement on the shape of societies of the future, but some common elements run through most futurist literature. Although some futurists are highly pessimistic and others very optimistic, virtually all agree that in the future sociologists will be studying a vastly different society. That society, characterized by enhanced geographic mobility, increased globalization and diversity, more sophisticated technology, and powerful forms of technomedia that link people and places everywhere on earth, will provide new and interesting challenges to sociologists. This will require increased internationalism of sociology and a return to its critical analysis of social institutions and social life (Abbott, 2000; Wallerstein, 2000). We believe the sociological approach introduced here will be essential for understanding social life throughout the twenty-first century.

Sociologists are not fortune-tellers, but we can construct theoretical models that can be used to plan and shape the societies of tomorrow. For sociology to remain viable, it must demonstrate its utility to society not only in interpreting but also in changing the world. This also addresses a pragmatic question often posed by students of sociology: “Wow, sociology is really interesting. But can I make a living at it?” Sociological Focus 1.3 focuses on some of the careers pursued by sociologists that involve the practical application of important sociological concepts, theories, and research skills.

Sociological models, as opposed to those of futurists, will be guided by a legacy that includes careful observation, critical thinking, and other scientific principles developed over many centuries. Sociologists’ goals, however, will continue to be those of sociology’s founders: to understand society and to formulate social policies that enhance the quality of human life. Although sociology is not about creating utopia, it is interested in what people think that might be (Shostak, 2000b). If sociology is to remain on the cutting edge of scientific inquiry, we must continue to challenge the commonsense assumptions and taken-for-granted explanations of the world in which we live. We encourage you to apply critical-thinking skills and to use your sociological imagination as you embark on your study of sociology.
Students often ask, “What can I do with a degree in sociology?” The question annoys academic sociologists to the point that it sometimes elicits a flippant answer such as “You can frame it” or “Anything that you are imaginative enough to do with it.” Actually, those two answers, especially the latter, are not all that bad. For a degree in sociology, like almost any college degree, does not represent vocational training for a particular job, as does a certificate from a beauty college or welding school. Sociology is a broad-based liberal arts discipline. Its concepts, theories, and methods can be used in virtually any aspect of one’s life. Whether a person is a shoe shiner, a shoe salesperson, or a shoe company magnate, an individual who has an understanding of society, social groups, and human behavior is likely to be more successful than one who lacks such insights. A “sociological perspective is invaluable for working in Today’s multiethnic and multinational business environment . . . unlike vocational training . . . sociology majors must actively define their skill set in a manner appropriate for the position sought” (Matchett, 2009:4).

Coursework and the degree in sociology do have some career-oriented applications, however, especially critical thinking, evaluating research methods and findings, and using statistical software (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren, 2008).

About 70 percent of those who have obtained a doctoral degree in sociology choose careers in academic settings, some teaching in high school but most teaching at community colleges, four-year colleges, or universities. Others with advanced degrees in sociology are employed by governmental and private corporations in a variety of specialties ranging from conducting and analyzing research to directing human resources, consulting, and serving in a wide array of supervisory and management positions. Students don’t have to achieve an advanced degree to put their sociology to work, however.

People with bachelor’s degrees in sociology are finding increased employment opportunities in state, county, and local social service agencies, court services, probation and parole, law enforcement, corrections, human resources, health care, business consulting, state and local government, city management, gerontology and eldercare, and the military. In 1988, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management established a “Sociology-GS-184” classification that outlines the standards for sociologists seeking employment in federal agencies and officially recognizes the specific contributions of sociology to the federal workforce. In 2008, Forbes ranked sociology as one of the top 10 highest paying “rare” jobs in the United States, using rare to mean a relatively small employment total (less than 5,000) and “high paying” to mean a salary higher than the national average (ASA Footnotes, 2008).

Additionally, the bachelor’s degree in sociology provides an excellent academic background for pursuing advanced degrees in areas such as law, social work, demography, gerontology, human resources, and business administration. Business and industry leaders increasingly recognize the value of a strong liberal arts education, as opposed to the narrower, more highly focused curricula of vocationally oriented programs. Students with degrees in sociology are increasingly being sought and recruited for their critical-thinking skills, their ability to read and synthesize vast amounts of diverse and contradictory information, their understanding of human social behavior, and especially their knowledge of how people interact in groups, institutions, and bureaucracies. Consequently, sociology majors are increasingly being employed as bankers, human resource directors, consultants, and for other important jobs in business and industry. Moreover, research on finding, getting, and keeping jobs increasingly indicates that the abilities to use social networks and to “get along with others on the job” are among the most valued assets for employees today. Who better than sociologists should understand the importance of social networks and social interaction?

In short, people can use their academic backgrounds in sociology and their sociological imaginations in countless ways to meet career goals. More important, sociological knowledge, understanding, and skills can prove personally rewarding in helping people better understand the social world in which they live.

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?
Sociology is the systematic and scientific study of human behavior, social groups, and society. It is based on the sociological imagination, which allows us to locate ourselves within a larger social context. It helps us to recognize the general in the particular and the strange in the familiar as well as to distinguish between personal troubles and social issues. An important aspect of sociological thinking is the ability to understand the significance of globalization while also recognizing the importance of diversity in human society.

SOCIOLOGY AND CRITICAL THINKING
Sociology differs from popular notions of human behavior in that it uses systematic, scientific methods of investigation and encourages sociological thinking that questions many of the commonsense and taken-for-granted views of our social world. Sociological thinking involves taking a closer look at our social world and recognizing that most often things are not necessarily what they seem. This approach is especially beneficial for analyzing the powerful influence of the mass media and their impact on society. Mass media refers to the traditional forms of media—newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television, and motion pictures.

TECHNOMEDIA IN FOCUS
Technomedia refers to the newer, more individualized forms of information technology such as fax machines, smartphones, fiber optics, and, most important, personal computers. Combined, the media do not merely reflect society, but also shape it, filtering information and framing events in ways that lead individuals to develop a sense of reality created by “media logic.” The mass media and technomedia have also made it possible to disseminate information almost instantaneously around the world, helping to link unique and diverse nations and cultures into a global society.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
The discipline of sociology arose out of a changing social climate that reflected problems associated with widespread industrialization, urbanization, and immigration and a changing intellectual climate that turned to science for explanations for the accompanying economic, political, and social upheaval experienced in both Europe and the United States.

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY
Three overriding theoretical perspectives, or paradigms, have dominated contemporary sociology: symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, and conflict. Although debates continue over which theoretical perspective is best, all three have made important contributions to sociological understanding. Functionalism and conflict focus on social structure and society as a whole, thus providing better analyses of macrolevel events, whereas interactionism focuses on interpersonal communication and provides keen insights into microlevel, small group, and day-to-day activities. Other important theoretical approaches and offshoots of the major paradigms, including dramaturgical analysis, labeling theory, and feminist theory, which combine elements of all three of the major paradigms, are making valuable contributions to the sociological enterprise. We believe that thinking sociologically is enhanced through an integrated approach that uses all three major perspectives as well as theories from other disciplines, when appropriate.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: SOCIOLOGY TODAY AND TOMORROW
Future sociologists must use the sociological imagination to fulfill the promise of sociology: to make the world a better place. Sociology’s success in that effort is influenced by the extent to which sociologists recognize how sociology has become institutionalized and tied to important elements of the social structure. Not only must sociologists develop a better understanding of history, but they are also beginning to construct theoretical models that can be used to plan and shape the societies of tomorrow. These models will build on a rich scientific foundation and a desire to enhance the quality of human life.
Key Terms

applied sociology, p. 17
conflict perspective, p. 19
critical thinking, p. 6
dramaturgical analysis, p. 18
feminist theory, p. 21
globalization, p. 5
ideal type, p. 15
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