



# The Nature and Uses of Sociology

## SYNOPSIS

### What Is Sociology?

- The Sociological Imagination
- Sociology and Popular Wisdom
- Sociology and the Other Social Sciences

**Our lives are governed** by the society in which we live. Social rules and conventions influence every aspect of our daily lives. We begin to learn which rules are socially acceptable and which ones are not before we can talk; and they are reinforced, altered, or contradicted every time we enter a social situation, whether new or familiar. For example, technology has provided parents with the opportunity to find out the sex of their baby before the child is born. With this information parents can begin to plan for the arrival of their little one by purchasing clothes, room decor, and toys. It is quite likely that if parents find out they are having a boy, their first purchases will primarily be in the color blue. On the other hand, if they are told their baby is a girl, they will purchase items that are pink. The reason it is easy to predict the actions of the parents is because we have been taught that blue is a socially acceptable color for boys and pink is for girls. There are times, however, when parents may choose to decorate in gender-neutral colors such as green and yellow. Regardless, by the time we are young children (some evidence suggests by the time we are 30-months-old), traditional gender stereotypes—such as what types of toys and activities are appropriate for boys and for girls—have been ingrained in us (Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, & Ruble, 2009). This, however, does not diminish their importance or pervasiveness.

The answers to many of our questions usually have at least some social components. Why, for example, do roommate situations with three people almost always have more problems than those with two? Do sororities or fraternities serve any real purpose? Why do these kinds of organizations choose to admit some people but not others? Have you had an argument with anyone lately? If you have, chances are that it arose, in part, from having different perceptions about how people should behave—perceptions influenced by social surroundings. The people employed in the housing offices of most schools are aware of this important sociological fact and try to place people from similar backgrounds as roommates. For example, sociologists have studied how roommate assignments can lead to interracial friendships and how a university can directly influence interracial friendships on campus (Tyson, 2007; Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009). Why do most of us feel uncomfortable with a group of people we do not know? Part of the reason is that we do not know how to behave: our social behavior is determined by a constant exchange of social cues, and these cues may differ from group to group. Indeed, why are you attending college, taking this course, and reading this book right now? Rates of college attendance

## Focal Point

### THE SOCIOLOGY OF RAMPAGE SHOOTING

On April 16, 2007, the worst school shooting in the history of the United States took place in Blacksburg, Virginia. On that day, 27 college students and five instructors were shot and killed during two separate incidents that spanned over two-and-a-half hours. Seung-Hui Cho, who was a 23-year-old English major at Virginia Polytechnic University and State School (Virginia Tech), carried out what seems to have been a premeditated and methodical attack on students and faculty. Accounts of the incident suggest that his attack consisted of a ruthless, merciless series of murders.

On January 18, 2011, Jared Lee Loughner opened fire at an informal political gathering outside a supermarket in Tucson, Arizona, killing six people and wounding 13 others. One of those severely wounded was Gabrielle Giffords, a Democratic congresswoman. Those killed included one of her staff members, a federal judge, three retired people, and a nine-year-old girl. This attack, like the one at Virginia Tech, also had the markings of a methodical, premeditated event.

In July, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik, bombed government buildings in Oslo, Norway, killing eight people, and then

carried out a mass shooting at a Workers Youth League camp, killing 69, mostly teenagers.

On July 20, 2012, James Egan Holmes walked into a midnight premier screening of the film *The Dark Knight Rises*, a Batman sequel, at a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado; he opened fire, killed 12 people, and injured 58 others. This was one of the largest rampage shootings in U.S. history. The killer, dressed in tactical clothing, had purchased a ticket and sat in the front row; about twenty minutes into the movie, he set off tear gas grenades and proceeded to open fire.

During the weeks and months following these events, newspaper articles abounded with speculations about the possible motives for the shootings and especially about how, in retrospect, the killers had manifested problematic psychological characteristics well before the deadly incidents had taken place. Seung-Hui Cho had a record, throughout his childhood, of psychological problems and psychiatric treatment, moodiness, being distant, and having exhibited troublesome and sometimes bizarre behaviors with other students and teachers while in school. Jared Lee Loughner also had exhibited signs of paranoid schizophrenia (although he was never involuntarily institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital) and had a history of rejection: by the military, by a community college, by a girlfriend, and also by some family members. Anders Behring Breivik is purported to be a right-wing extremist who felt that his victims were traitors that embraced multicultural and Muslim immigration policies. James Egan Holmes was neuroscience graduate student, in the process of dropping out, who was reported to be a loner and who had called his psychiatrist nine minutes prior to the shooting. During preliminary hearings he was said to appear emotionless in court.

While the Virginia Tech massacre, the shootings in Arizona that surrounded Gabrielle Giffords, the shootings at government buildings and a workers' camp in Norway, and the movie theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado were all tragedies almost



*In a recent incident of a rampage shooting James Egan Holmes walked into a midnight premier screening of a Batman sequel at a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado, opened fire, killed 12 people, and injured 58 others. (AP Wide World Photo)*

differ dramatically from one social group to another. These are not simply matters of interest for sociology but also for society at large. Concerns about and efforts to achieve diversity, for example, are increasingly a part of many workplaces.

The list could be extended indefinitely, but our point should be clear: Whether or not we like it or are even aware of it, the social fabric that surrounds us dictates many aspects of how we live. One of the pleasures of studying sociology is that it has not

beyond belief, there have been many shooting rampages within the past 50 years, dating back to 1966 when 25-year-old Charles Whitman barricaded himself in the top of the clock tower at the University of Texas in Austin. Whitman then shot and killed 14 people and injured 31 others before being killed by police.

Much like yourself, the shooting victims probably thought going to college, an informal meeting with a politician in a shopping center, working in a government building, participating in a camp, and attending a premier of a movie were very safe activities in places where crime is limited to petty theft and other nonviolent offenses. However, in recent years

... the first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem.

Peter Berger

the media have bombarded us with images of school violence. We hear commentary from multiple news agencies and television personalities suggesting that schools, once thought to be safe havens for children, have become killing fields. How much of this is truth and how much is myth? Are young people becoming increasingly violent? Should we arm our students with bulletproof vests before sending them off to school? Are students safer if they attend schools in rural areas rather than in inner cities? After incidents as horrific as these, and others like them, it is easy to focus exclusively on the characteristics of the killers and/or to blame society for a decline in morality. Some have even suggested that such rampages are the result of severely differing values (political or otherwise) or the availability of guns. These explanations tend to be quick reactions to tragedies that may or may not be accurate or worthwhile explanations.

As sociologists, we feel that to answer questions about why incidents such as these take place, we should first consider what Peter Berger suggests in *Invitation to Sociology*: “the first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem” (1963). As a sociology student, you will be asked to examine issues based on a critical analysis, rather than simply relying on the media or your own personal experiences to answer questions related to social phenomena. It is best to examine issues from various points of view, particularly those directly affected by the phenomenon.

For example, Peter Stearns (2008) conducted an extensive social history of public violence, critically analyzing and comparing the massacre at the University of Texas with Virginia Tech. How did the media handle public reactions? How did the police handle the incidents? What types of communication were in place to help warn the public? What types of policy changes took place? What was the impact on society? Cybelle Fox and David J. Harding (2005) investigated school shootings from the point of view of **organizational deviance** rather than focusing so much on the characteristics of the killers. “From a sociological perspective, what is perhaps

most surprising is that, with few exceptions, school officials were unaware that the shooters in these incidents were experiencing severe emotional, social, and/or behavioral problems or that they had such rage against the institution” (Fox & Harding, 2005, p. 69). Their approach looks not so much at individual killers but at what organizations do or do not do to perpetuate the situation. Organizational deviance occurs when events that are created by organizations do not conform to an organization’s goals or expectations and produce unanticipated and harmful outcomes (Vaughan, 1999, p. 273). It is often an unintended consequence of the normal activities of actors within an organization (Fox & Harding, 2005, p. 70).

Our point here is not that we are shifting the blame from the individual to society. Rather, our point is to reaffirm Berger’s contention that “things are not what they seem” and that sociology offers us perspectives, theories, and methods to analyze events in such a way that we go well beyond our immediate reactions and what might seem to be common sense. Then, we can gain a more accurate and helpful understanding of the causes and consequences of events. This does not mean that sociology always finds answers that are different than our initial assumptions (although sometimes the conclusions are very different than what we initially assume). Sociology employs, instead, a critical analysis that enables us to feel more confident in explanations and to have explanations, hopefully, which are more useful in helping stem disasters such as rampage shootings.

### Organizational deviance

Occurs when events are created by or exist within organizations that do not conform to the organization’s goals or expectations and that produce unanticipated and harmful outcomes

only scientific applications but also personal and occupational applications. Sociology attempts to explain not only the factors that draw group members together, but also why we may feel uncomfortable talking to most athletes and yet feel very comfortable talking to most members of the drama club (or vice versa). Although we may not recognize them, there are reasons for our social behavior; having knowledge of these reasons is useful in our personal lives, in our occupations, and in understanding trends in the

world around us. At its best, an understanding of sociology can bring to light an entirely new dimension of social forces that influence us constantly.

## 1.1 WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

What is **sociology**? Sociology is the scientific study of human behavior, social groups, and society. The term itself, often credited to Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the founder of sociology, is derived from two root words: *socius*, which means “companion” or “associate,” and *logos*, which means “word.” At its most basic, then, it means “words about human associations or society.”

Another way to find out what sociology is would be to observe some sociologists at work. Some might spend most of their time poring over volumes from the census bureau or traveling to northern Alaska every year to talk to Eskimos about their hunting practices. Some might use a survey to investigate sexual behavior or might study kinship systems (i.e., family relationship patterns) among natives of the South Pacific. Others might look into how college students perceive their professors or how television has influenced family life in the United States.

If you pursued all these approaches, you would probably find yourself with a bewildering variety of ideas about what sociology is. What do these approaches have in common? They all suggest that sociology is concerned with every aspect of the self in relationships with others and every aspect of the social world that affects a person’s thoughts

or actions. As stated by the American Sociological Association in a booklet titled *21st Century Careers with an Undergraduate Degree in Sociology* (2009), sociology is the study of *social life* and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. The term social life encompasses all interpersonal relationships, all groups or collections of persons, and all types of social organizations. The “causes and consequences of human behavior” encompass how these relationships, groups, and organizations are interrelated; how they influence personal and interpersonal behavior; how they affect and are affected by the larger society; how they change or why they remain static; and what the consequences are of these factors. This definition reflects the belief that people can be understood only in the context of their contacts, associations, and communications with other



◀ Social rules and conventions influence our lives and our actions, including how parents may plan for the arrival of a child whose gender is known beforehand. (Shutterstock)

people. The very heart of sociology then—its concern with the complexities and subtleties of human social life—makes it a discipline that is highly relevant not only to professional sociologists but also to people in virtually every line of work and at every level.

Thus, sociology may consider a wide range of general questions such as the following:

1. How do groups influence individual human behavior?
2. What are the causes and consequences of a particular system of social order?
3. What social factors contribute to a particular social change?
4. What purpose is served by a particular social organization?
5. What are the causes and consequences of a particular social system?

Sociologists then use these general questions to help in identifying and responding to more specific questions. In the case of question five, for example, a sociologist might further inquire about a particular social system by asking questions: How do the patterns of social interaction in a small village differ from those in a large city? How do city planners help ensure social tranquility in rural areas undergoing rapid economic growth and development?

### Sociology

The study of human society and social life and the social causes and consequences of human behavior



Other areas investigated by sociologists include racial and ethnic relationships, prejudice and discrimination, power and politics, jobs and income, families and family life, school systems and the educational process, social control, organizations, bureaucracies, groups and group dynamics, leisure, healthcare systems, military systems, women's movements, and labor movements. The stratification of people by wealth, education, power, and such differences as gender or age may also be examined. As you can see, sociology is an extremely broad field. It provides knowledge that directly applies to occupations that involve evaluation, planning, research, analysis, counseling, and problem solving. In its most comprehensive sense, sociology can be regarded as including every aspect of social life—its causes, its forms and structures, its effects, and its changes and transformations.

## 1.1a The Sociological Imagination

Throughout this course you will likely be asked to “step outside your box” and to view social issues as an outsider. The purpose of this request is to help you develop a **sociological imagination**—a quality of mind that allows us to understand the influence of history and biography on our interactive processes (Mills, 1959). Although published in 1959, Mills' description of what sociological thinking entails is equally as accurate today. In other words, our experiences guide our perceptions. Like the blind men who each described the elephant differently, depending on whether they felt its trunk, tail, ear, body, or leg, everyone regards the world from his or her own point of view. A school building may be seen as a place of work by a teacher, as a place of study by a student, as a tax liability by a homeowner, as a fire hazard by a firefighter, and as a particular structural design by a builder. In the same way, sociologists consider the social world from their own unique perspective.

As a student, you will develop not only a sociological imagination but also a sociological perspective. What is the **sociological perspective**? It is a conscious effort to question the obvious and to remove us from familiar experiences and examine them critically and objectively. This sort of *empirical* (based on observation or experiment) investigation enables us to determine whether our generalizations about society are accurate. These investigations could involve asking questions about poverty in a wealthy nation, about the social forces leading to unionization, or about the effects of divorce on family life and on children. Ultimately, it requires us to consider issues such as employment, income, education, gender, age, and race—and how these and other externalities influence people's experiences.

This perspective also entails efforts to see beyond individual experiences. The sociologist tries to interpret patterns—the regular, recurrent aspects of social life. An awareness of interaction patterns and group processes can help us to understand the relationship between our personal experiences and the society in which we live.

Human behavior is, to a large extent, shaped by the groups to which people belong, by social interactions, and by the surrounding social and cultural context. Apart from the social and cultural context, for example, it may be extremely difficult to understand the spontaneous, simultaneous, and collective shout that occurs when a person with a wooden stick hits a round object over the head of a person wearing a thick leather glove on one hand but not on the other. It may be difficult to understand the anger of people in a neighborhood when children are bused to a school in a different neighborhood. It may be difficult to understand why people often become overtly vehement in their disagreements about policies concerning taxes, health care, gun control, abortion, public prayer, same sex marriages, and other

### Sociological imagination

The ability to see how history and biography—together—influence our lives

### Sociological perspective

A way of looking at society and social behavior that involves questioning the obvious, seeking patterns, and looking beyond the individual in an attempt to discern social processes



Macro-level analysis is concerned with large-scale structures and processes such as war, unemployment, and divorce. Micro-level analysis is concerned with how individuals, such as the unemployed, behave in social situations. (iStockphoto)

persistent controversial issues. Behaviors such as these are reflections of the group, the institution, and the society in which they occur. Because individual behavior can be understood only in its social and cultural context, the sociological perspective considers the individual as part of the larger society. It notes how the society is reflected in individuals and attempts to discover patterns in behaviors and regularity in events.

The sociological perspective operates at two levels, termed **macrosociology** and **microsociology**. The difference relates to the size of the unit of analysis. Macro-level analysis deals with large-scale structures and processes: broad social categories, institutions, and social systems, such as war, unemployment, and divorce. Solutions to these problems are sought at the structural or organizational level.

One example of macrosociological analysis is the study of how societies transition from an agricultural economic system to an industrial one. Micro-level analysis, on the other hand, is concerned with how individuals behave in social situations. The social problems of a veteran, an unemployed worker, or a divorcée would be subjects for microsociological research. Solutions would be sought at the personal or interpersonal level. One example of microsociological analysis is the study of university classroom conformity, where the researcher observes the day-to-day patterns of behavior and socialization occurring among those enrolled in the class. The sociological perspective involves investigations of problems on both scales.

## 1.1b Sociology and Popular Wisdom

It is widely assumed, sometimes accurately so, that research findings tend to support what we already know. We all have some idea as to why people act the way they do and how society works. As social beings, most of us were raised in families and communities. Everyone has learned to obey traffic signals and danger signs. We have all heard the debate and rhetoric of presidential and local political campaigns. We have all read newspapers and heard television reports that remind us continually of crime, racial conflicts, poverty, inflation, pollution, AIDS, and teenage pregnancies. We all understand social life—our own experiences make us experts in human behavior and in the nature of society. Let us examine a few examples to prove our point. Aren't the following statements obviously true?

1. People who commit rampage shootings are obviously mentally ill and suddenly snapped before the incident.
2. Because poor racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in larger cities, poverty is more an urban problem than a rural one.
3. Because capital punishment leads people to give serious thought to the consequences before committing crimes, crime rates are much lower in states that have capital punishment than in those that do not.
4. Because males are more prone to violence than females, suicide rates are lower for girls than for boys.
5. Because we all know that death is approaching as we grow older, fear of dying increases with age.

### Macrosociology

A level of sociological analysis concerned with large-scale structures and processes, such as war and unemployment

### Microsociology

The level of sociological analysis concerned with small-scale units such as individuals in small group or social interactions

Many other examples could be given, but these common sense ideas should illustrate our point. Although you may agree with all of them, research findings indicate that all of these statements are false. Key findings from a 2002 Safe School Initiative study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service found that most perpetrators of school shootings had not previously been evaluated for psychological disorders, nor had they sought assistance from a behavioral agency. Many of the offenders had kept journals detailing their anger and rage prior to their shooting spree. For example, Charles Whitman kept a journal and asked that his body be studied after he was dead so police would know why he had homicidal tendencies. It was discovered during autopsy that Whitman had a brain tumor. The study also found that

school shooters rarely “snap.” Rather, they display behavior that concerns others prior to the incident. Seung Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, had several teachers note his suicidal and homicidal ideation while he was in the eighth grade. Further, several female students at Virginia Tech complained to resident advisors or to campus police that Cho was sending them unwanted messages. In 2005, an English professor was concerned about Cho’s behavior and complained to the department chair that Cho was taking pictures of other students from underneath his desk and writing material that appeared to be overtly violent. Prior to the 2011 Arizona shooting of Gabrielle Giffords and bystanders, Jared Lee Loughner had placed a disturbing video on Myspace that included a handgun on top of a U.S. history textbook and had exhibited behavior that was odd enough to lead to his suspension from community college. Even though the administrators would not allow Loughner to return unless he received a mental health evaluation, he never did receive an evaluation and dropped out. There is no record of him ever having made explicit threats prior to the shooting (Lipton, Savage, & Shane, 2011). Anders Behring Breivik, the 2011 Norwegian mass murderer, was deemed by a court to be sane. While James Egan Holmes was at first declined acceptance to graduate school at the University of Alabama, records show that he was “an excellent applicant” and predicted to be a “leader of the future” (Lean, 2012).

### thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

1. It was suggested that human behavior is, to a large extent, shaped through our social interactions and cultural contexts. Discuss ways in which members of our communities influence our everyday choices. More personally, to what extent are you solely responsible for your own condition or destiny? To what extent do you think that people have free will? Think of free will not only in terms of freedom to do what one desires to do but also in terms of how we do what we desire. Do we determine what we desire?
2. In regard to school shootings, how does the sociological imagination help us to understand the events at Virginia Tech University?

The second statement in our list of popular wisdom suggests poverty is an urban problem not a rural one. This belief is most likely perpetuated by the media, whose

**BVT Lab**

Flashcards are available  
for this chapter at  
[www.BVTLab.com](http://www.BVTLab.com).



*The belief that poverty is an urban problem is most likely perpetuated by the media, whose images portray unwed minority mothers and their children living in public housing within large urban areas. (AP Wide World Photo)*

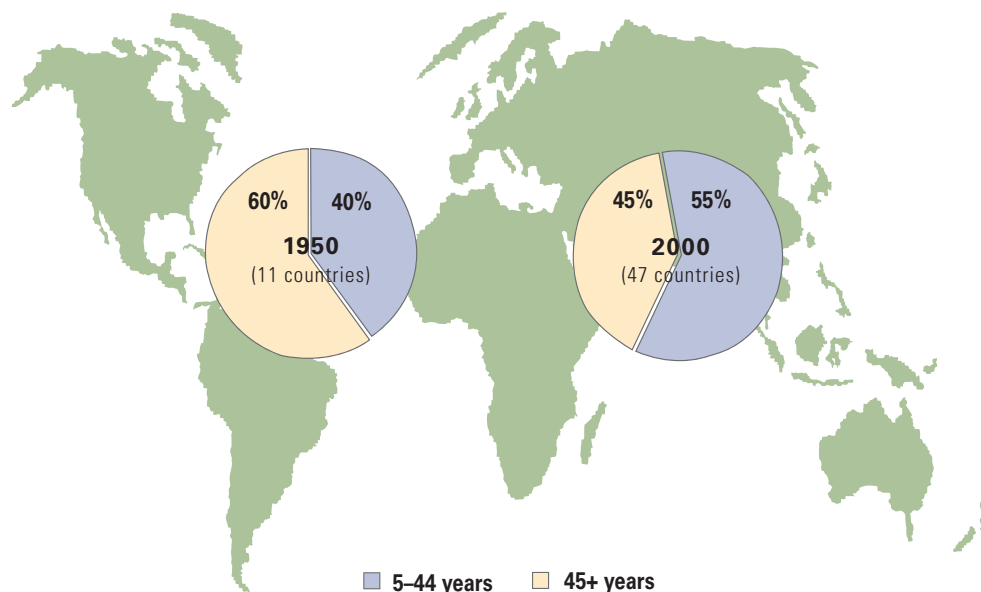
images of poverty often involve unwed, minority mothers and their children living in public housing within large urban areas. However, the truth is that poverty is more prevalent in rural areas than in urban communities. According to Jensen (2006) approximately 7.3 million persons living in rural communities are poor. In 2005, 15.1% of the rural population was living in poverty, compared to 12.5% of persons living in urban communities. Additionally, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2004) reports that of the top 50 counties in the United States with the highest rates of child poverty, 48 are located in rural America. One in five children, or 18.9%, living in rural communities are poor, a number higher than urban children from all minority groups. Lack of job opportunities is one reason for higher poverty in rural communities.

The third statement suggests crime rates are lower in states practicing capital punishment than in states without the death penalty. The evidence, however, suggests there is very little relationship between the rate of murder and other crimes and the use of capital punishment. The murder rates in states with the death penalty are not consistently lower than the rates in states without it. In general, the death penalty does not deter people from murdering or committing other crimes. Even imprisonment does not seem to be a major deterrent, as is evident from the *recidivism* (relapse into repeating criminal behavior) rate of people who have been in prison. Rather than changing people's attitudes, punishment may make them more cautious and promote extra efforts to avoid apprehension.

The fourth statement suggests that males are more prone to commit suicide due to their violent nature. While suicide rates (Table 1-1) are higher for males than for females in most countries, including the United States, there are some countries where the rates between males and females are strikingly different, some where they are similar, and at least one (China) where they are higher for females (World Health Organization). However, the suicide data presents us with evidence that understanding suicide is much more complex than one might initially think. For example, according to World Health Organization data, Eastern European countries have the highest rates of suicide for both males and females. The Eastern Mediterranean region and Central Asia have the

**Figure 1-1**

**Changes in the Age Distribution of Cases of Suicide Between 1950 and 2000.**



*Note.* Adapted from "Changes in the Age Distribution of Cases of Suicide," World Health Organization, 2002. Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/prevention/suicide/changes/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/changes/en/), on March 06, 2013.



**Table 1-1** Suicide Rates per 100,000 by Country, Year, and Sex

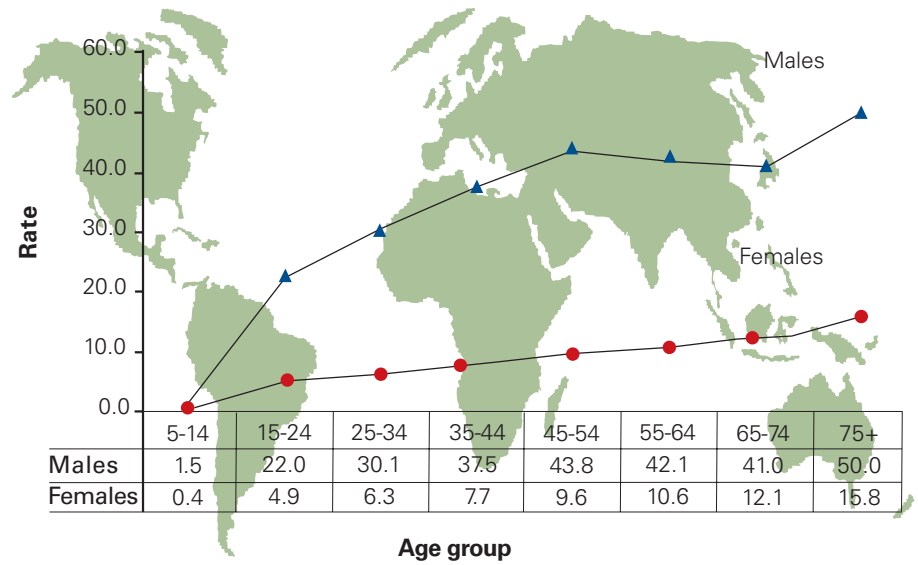
Most recent year available; as of 2011

Country	Year	Males	Females	Country	Year	Males	Females
Albania	03	4.7	3.3	Kuwait	09	1.9	1.7
Antigua and Barbuda	95	0.0	0.0	Kyrgyzstan	09	14.1	3.6
Argentina	08	12.6	3.0	Latvia	09	40.0	8.2
Armenia	08	2.8	1.1	Lithuania	09	61.3	10.4
Australia	06	12.8	3.6	Luxembourg	08	16.1	3.2
Austria	09	23.8	7.1	Maldives	05	0.7	0.0
Azerbaijan	07	1.0	0.3	Malta	08	5.9	1.0
Bahamas	05	1.9	0.6	Mauritius	08	11.8	1.9
Bahrain	06	4.0	3.5	Mexico	08	7.0	1.5
Barbados	06	7.3	0.3	Netherlands	09	13.1	5.5
Belarus	07	48.7	8.8	New Zealand	07	18.1	5.5
Belgium	05	28.8	10.3	Nicaragua	06	9.0	2.6
Belize	08	6.6	0.7	Norway	09	17.3	6.5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	91	20.3	3.3	Panama	08	9.0	1.9
Brazil	08	7.7	2.0	Paraguay	08	5.1	2.0
Bulgaria	08	18.8	6.2	Peru	07	1.9	1.0
Canada	04	17.3	5.4	Philippines	93	2.5	1.7
Chile	07	18.2	4.2	Poland	08	26.4	4.1
China (selected rural & urban areas)	99	13.0	14.8	Portugal	09	15.6	4.0
China (Hong Kong SAR)	09	19.0	10.7	Puerto Rico	05	13.2	2.0
Colombia	07	7.9	2.0	Republic of Korea	09	39.9	22.1
Costa Rica	09	10.2	1.9	Republic of Moldova	08	30.1	5.6
Croatia	09	28.9	7.5	Romania	09	21.0	3.5
Cuba	08	19.0	5.5	Russian Federation	06	53.9	9.5
Cyprus	08	7.4	1.7	Saint Kitts and Nevis	95	0.0	0.0
Czech Republic	09	23.9	4.4	Saint Lucia	05	4.9	0.0
Denmark	06	17.5	6.4	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	08	5.4	1.9
Dominican Republic	05	3.9	0.7	Sao Tome and Principe	87	0.0	1.8
Ecuador	09	10.5	3.6	Serbia	09	28.1	10.0
Egypt	09	0.1	0.0	Seychelles	08	8.9	0.0
El Salvador	08	12.9	3.6	Singapore	06	12.9	7.7
Estonia	08	30.6	7.3	Slovakia	05	22.3	3.4
Finland	09	29.0	10.0	Slovenia	09	34.6	9.4
France	07	24.7	8.5	South Africa	07	1.4	0.4
Georgia	09	7.1	1.7	Spain	08	11.9	3.4
Germany	06	17.9	6.0	Sri Lanka	91	44.6	16.8
Greece	09	6.0	1.0	Suriname	05	23.9	4.8
Grenada	08	0.0	0.0	Sweden	08	18.7	6.8
Guatemala	08	5.6	1.7	Switzerland	07	24.8	11.4
Guyana	06	39.0	13.4	Syrian Arab Republic	85	0.2	0.0
Haiti	03	0.0	0.0	Tajikistan	01	2.9	2.3
Honduras	78	0.0	0.0	Thailand	02	12.0	3.8
Hungary	09	40.0	10.6	TFYR Macedonia	03	9.5	4.0
Iceland	08	16.5	7.0	Trinidad and Tobago	06	17.9	3.8
India	09	13.0	7.8	Turkmenistan	98	13.8	3.5
Iran	91	0.3	0.1	Ukraine	09	37.8	7.0
Ireland	09	19.0	4.7	United Kingdom	09	10.9	3.0
Israel	07	7.0	1.5	United States of America	05	17.7	4.5
Italy	07	10.0	2.8	Uruguay	04	26.0	6.3
Jamaica	90	0.3	0.0	Uzbekistan	05	7.0	2.3
Japan	09	36.2	13.2	Venezuela	07	5.3	1.2
Jordan	08	0.2	0.0	Zimbabwe	90	10.6	5.2
Kazakhstan	08	43.0	9.4				

Note. Adapted from "Suicide Rates per 100,000 by Country, Year and Sex (Table)," World Health Organization, 2002. Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/prevention/suicide\\_rates/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide_rates/en/), on March 06, 2013.

**Figure 1-2**

**Distribution of Suicide Rates per 100,000 by Gender and Age, 2000.**



*Note.* Adapted from "Distribution of Suicides Rates (per 100,000) by Gender and Age, 2000," World Health Organization. Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/prevention/suicide/suicide\\_rates\\_chart/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicide_rates_chart/en/), on March 06, 2013.

lowest suicide rates. Globally, 55% of suicides are among people ages 15 to 44, and 45% are among those ages 45 and older. Youth suicide is increasing at the greatest rate. Sociology prompts us to ask why the above trends are taking place. What social and cultural factors have an effect on suicide rates among different groups? In Chapter 2, we talk about the social factors that contribute to suicide in our discussion of the classic sociologist Emile Durkheim.

The fifth statement suggests that fear of dying increases with age as the likelihood of death approaches. A *Los Angeles Times* poll (Pinkus, Richardson, & Armet, 2000) found that only 7% of people over age 65 think about and fear death while 20% of 18- to 28-year-olds are afraid of dying.

These examples illustrate that, although some popular observations may be true, many others are not supported by empirical data. Without social research, it is extremely difficult to distinguish what is actually true from what our common sense tells us should be true. Many people have suffered enormous losses in personal relationships and business deals because they acted on the basis of what they considered "common sense" about what they believed was the truth. We believe that the knowledge you gain from sociology will help to improve the quality of your personal and professional life. Even if this is the only sociology course you ever take, we hope that after completing it you will have a far greater understanding of yourself, of your society, and of human behavior—as well as an increased ability to question many of the popular observations widely accepted as truth by the press and by our fellow citizens. In addition, part of what is needed to develop your sociological perspective and to comprehend "the truth" is the realization that we live in a global world and we are but one part of the big picture. Media stereotypes often lead to misconceptions about other cultures or social issues within and outside our society.

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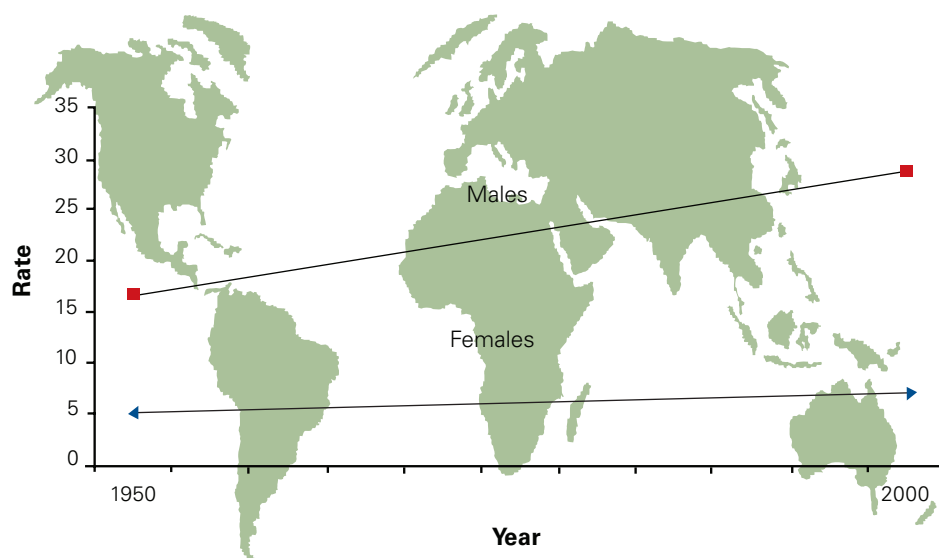
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## 1.1c Sociology and the Other Social Sciences

All branches of science attempt to discover general truths, propositions, or laws through methods based on observation and experimentation. Science is often divided into two

**Figure 1-3**

Evolution of Global Suicide Rates 1950–2000  
(per 100,000).



Note. Adapted from "Evolution 1950–2000 of Global Suicide Rates (per 100,000)," World Health Organization. Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/prevention/suicide/evolution/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/evolution/en/), on March 06, 2013.

categories: the social sciences and what are often referred to as the natural sciences. The natural sciences include (a) the *biological sciences*: biology, eugenics, botany, bacteriology, and so forth, which deal with living organisms, both human and nonhuman; and (b) the *physical sciences*: physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, and so on, which deal with the nonliving physical world. The word “natural” must be applied to these sciences with caution, however. The topics covered by the **social sciences** are just as natural as those that the natural sciences embrace. Sociology, like other social sciences, applies the scientific method to studying human behavior. For example, the organization of cities, the collective action of a football team, and the patterns of interaction in a family system are just as natural as electricity, magnetism, and the behavior of insects and can be studied using a scientific approach.

Sociology is a social science, but it is important to realize that a complete understanding of a society or of social relationships would be impossible without an understanding of the physical world in which societies exist and an understanding of the biological factors that affect humans. Like the other social sciences—psychology, anthropology, economics, and political science—sociology deals with human relationships, social systems, and societies. Although the boundaries among the various social sciences are sometimes hazy, each tends to focus on a particular aspect of the world and tries to understand it. A brief description of the other social sciences, and sociology’s relationship to them, may be helpful in providing an understanding of the nature of social science, in general, and of sociology, in particular.

## Economics

**Economics** is the study of how goods, services, and wealth are produced, consumed, and distributed within societies. Figures about the gross national product, balance of payments and deficits, or per-capita income may seem to belong more to the realm of statistics or mathematics than to social

### Social science

A science that has human behavior, social organizations, or society as its subject matter

### Economics

The study of how goods, services, and wealth are produced, consumed, and distributed



Sociology applies the scientific method to studying human behavior, such as the collective action of a football team. (iStockphoto)

## How to Read a Table

Sociologists make frequent use of tables to present the findings of their own research, to provide numerical evidence to support or reject statements they make, or to show comparisons among social groups, categories, events, or across different points in time. Numerous tables are presented throughout this text, not so much to present our own research findings as to lend numerical support to substantive content and to show comparisons among groups or periods of time. You will be able to understand the contents of a table more easily if you follow a systematic procedure. The previous table in this text is used as a model (Table 1-1) in leading you through the steps to follow in reading a table.

1. **Examine the title.** At the top of a good table is a title that tells precisely what the table contains. The title in Table 1-1 informs us that this table includes information about suicide numbers and rates per one hundred thousand from selected countries.
2. **Check the source.** The source of the information presented usually appears at the bottom of the table. Unless the table presents original data, it probably includes a source note listing the research journal or other publication that contains the original information. The source note tells where the data comes from and where we can go to locate the data, and it helps us judge the reliability of the information. In Table 1-1, the data come from the World Health Organization.
3. **Look for any headnotes or footnotes.** Headnotes generally appear below the title; footnotes are likely to appear below the table, but above the source note. Headnotes or footnotes may tell how the data were collected, how a question was asked, why some information is lacking, which statistical measure was used, and/or why the data were presented as they were. Table 1-1 includes a headnote that lets the reader know the data is from the most recent year available, 2011. It is important to know what the figures actually indicate, or if there are any exceptions to the rest of the data in the table. Readers interested in getting further data about suicide or in checking rates in the future can access data from the World Health Organization.
4. **Read the column and row headings.** Tables contain two important types of headings. The column headings appear at the top and tell what appears below them. The row headings appear on the left and describe the information to the right of them across the table. Referring again to Table 1-1, you will see two levels of headings. The first level of the heading tells you the data found within each column: the country, year, number, and rate of suicide is found within each one. The second level of heading further divides the information into gender and total suicides for each previous heading. The first column (Countries) explains what are in the row headings below. Keep both the column and the row headings in mind as you look at the table to make comparisons.
5. **Make comparisons.** Now that we know what the figures mean (numbers and rates), what the column headings refer to (gender and totals), and what the row indicates (countries), we are ready to read the table and to make comparisons. In referring back to Table 1-1, we see by looking at the vertical column the number of suicides—numbers and rates—for specific countries. Looking at the horizontal row, we can compare the numbers and rates of suicides for males and females and get total number or percentage of suicides for a specific country. Comparing columns and rows, we can note similarities, differences, or trends. By doing this, we are ready for the final and highly important step: drawing conclusions.
6. **Draw conclusions.** What can we conclude from the material presented? How are suicide rates different from a global perspective? What are the differences in rates between males and females in various countries? How can we explain the differences in suicide rates among developed countries? Do these data support the popular wisdom mentioned in the text that suicide is typically a male problem?

Tables will vary considerably in format and complexity, but following these six steps should assist you in understanding and grasping the information presented in any table you encounter. You will not only read tables when studying sociology but will also often use the ability to read and interpret tables in your personal and professional life.



science; yet these statistics reflect individual behavior, the relationships among groups, and the functioning of society. The effects of supply and demand on prices and the distribution and consumption of material goods serve as indicators of social exchange. Although sociologists also study factors such as these, they devote their attention to different aspects of them such as paying attention to actual behavior or attitudes, to business enterprises as social organizations, or to the impact of religion or education on levels of productivity or consumption. Economists may provide us with import and export figures, ratios of savings to investment, and information about the rate at which money changes hands; however, they would be unlikely to interpret these factors as being the result of people buying new cars to gain prestige or of their starting new businesses because they are frustrated with their jobs or their bosses.

## Political Science

**Political science** is the study of power, governments, and political processes. Political scientists study different kinds of governments, as well as interpersonal processes and means through which power is exercised—focusing on both abstract theory and the actual operation of government. During elections, it is political scientists who provide us with information about voting patterns, changes from previous elections, and the characteristics of voters. Traditionally, political scientists have been interested primarily in political theory and government administration. More recently, however, they have begun to devote more attention to matters of interest to the sociologist, such as the acquisition of political beliefs, the social backgrounds of political activists, and the role of women and of ethnic, racial, and other minorities in political outcomes.

## Anthropology

**Anthropology**, like sociology, is a broad and varied discipline. It includes physical anthropology, archaeology, cultural history, social linguistics, and social and cultural anthropology. *Physical anthropologists* attempt to understand both **traditional indigenous** and modern cultures by studying physical traits such as the shape and size of skulls, artifacts such as pottery and weapons, and genetic mutations of both human and nonhuman forms of life. The work of *cultural* or *social anthropologists*, on the other hand, is very similar to that of sociologists. Like sociologists, they are concerned with social institutions, patterns of organization, and other aspects of society. There are differences in the two fields, however. Anthropologists generally study a society as a whole, whereas sociologists are likely to concentrate on one aspect of a society. Also, anthropologists often live in the culture or community they are studying so that they can observe behavior directly. Sociologists are more likely to rely on statistics, questionnaires, or secondary data; they are frequently interested in comparing information about the social processes and structures across different cultures, whereas anthropologists often study cultures or communities individually.

## Psychology

**Psychology** is concerned primarily with human mental processes and individual human behavior. Frequent areas of study include learning, human development, behavior disorders, perception, emotion, motivation, creativity, personality, and a wide range of other mental and behavioral processes. In addition to being studied by psychologists, some of these areas are also studied by sociologists and by members of a field known as **social psychology**. These three branches of social science have different emphases, however. *Psychology* is concerned with individuals. *Social psychology* is the study of how an individual influences his or her social interactions with other individuals or with groups and of how social behavior influences the individual. *Sociology* deals primarily with groups and social systems. Much of the material covered in sociology textbooks is considered, technically, to be social psychology.

### Political science

The study of power, government, and political processes

### Anthropology

The study of the physical, biological, social, and cultural development of humans, often on a comparative basis

### Traditional indigenous

Refers to ethnic groups who are native to a land or region, usually before the arrival of a foreign and possibly dominating culture

### Psychology

The study of human mental processes and individual human behavior

### Social psychology

The study of how individuals interact with other individuals or groups and how groups influence the individual

## History

**History** is considered either a social science or one of the humanities and provides a chronological record of past events. Sociology is an analytical discipline that tries to derive general truths about society. History, on the other hand, is basically descriptive; historians traditionally consider every event to be unique, assuming that attempts at classification or generalization may impair their ability to understand exactly what happened. For example, a sociologist studying the Bolshevik revolution might try to determine whether revolutions evolve through a standard series of stages or whether particular social situations are common to most pre-revolutionary societies. A historian studying the same revolution would be more interested in discovering the exact sequence of the events that actually occurred, particularly as described in documents written by persons who experienced those events.

Increasingly, however, many historians are becoming more sociological in their orientation. Instead of concentrating exclusively on events—names, dates, successions of kings, and details of battles—they are analyzing broad social movements and general social patterns. Many are turning to sociological methods of analysis to determine what social forces influenced specific historical events.

## Geography

**Geography**, often considered a natural science, is concerned with the physical environment and the distribution of plants and animals, including humans. Geographers may study such things as why a particular trade route evolved or how the formation of nations is influenced by the physical landscape. The *physical geographer* investigates climate, agriculture, the distribution of plant species, and oceanography. *Social* and *cultural geographers*, like sociologists, may be interested in how the distribution of people in a particular area influences social relationships. Sometimes, *urban geographers* and *urban sociologists* work together on such problems as how various types of housing affect family life and how a given transportation system affects employment and productivity. Although physical geography usually is not considered a social science, social geography clearly shares many areas of interest with the other social sciences.

### History

The study of the past; social history is concerned with past human social events.

### Geography

The study of the physical environmental and the distribution of plants and animals, including humans

Is **social work** a social science? Technically, it is not. Social work is the field in which the principles of the social sciences, especially sociology, are applied to actual social problems in the same way that the principles of physiology are applied in medicine and the principles of economics are applied in business.

The **applied sciences** (those that directly use these principles) are often considered distinct from the **pure sciences** (those that seek knowledge for its own sake); the two actually can be considered to occupy different points on the same continuum, however. At one end of the continuum would be the disciplines that use knowledge to solve actual problems. A social worker might, for example, use information obtained from family research to try to place children in foster homes or to establish centers for abused spouses. At the other end of the continuum would be the disciplines involved in research—not to solve a specific problem, but simply to increase our understanding of the world. A researcher of this sort might study child rearing or spousal abuse as a function of income or education levels. Nevertheless, few social scientists do only pure research, and few social workers do only applied science. Social workers, for example, devise their own research and techniques to help people solve personal and group problems; and the resulting applications contribute to our existing body of knowledge. For their part, sociologists have always been involved in both applied and pure research. Thus, sociologists and social workers do share some common tasks, but it is a mistake (albeit a common one) to regard sociology as equivalent to social work or social welfare. Likewise, it is a common mistake to assume that social work is the only way to apply sociology.

### Social work

The field in which the principles of the social sciences are applied to actual social problems

### Applied sciences

The area of science in which the knowledge gained from the “pure” sciences is put into practice

### Pure science

The area of science in which knowledge is sought for its own sake with little emphasis on how the knowledge might be applied

## thinking SOCIOLOGICALLY

1. The role of women in society is different in many parts of the world. Choose one or two of the social sciences described in this chapter and discuss how it or they would address the various roles of women throughout the world.
2. Are sociologists also social workers? Are social workers sociologists? Explain your answers.

# Wrapping it up



## Summary

1. Sociology is the study of society, social life, and the causes and consequences of human social behavior. The terms society and social life encompass interpersonal relations within and among social groups and social systems. Sociologists study a wide range of behavior—from small groups (families) to large ones (bureaucracies)—question the obvious, seek patterns and regularities, and look beyond individuals to social interactions and group processes.
2. Sociological imagination is the ability to see the world from a sociological point of view. Using sociological imagination, an individual is able to analyze a social phenomenon from a sociological perspective. This perspective can be applied both to microsociology, which considers problems at the level of interpersonal and small-group processes, and to macrosociology, which considers large-scale problems, structures, social organizations, and social systems.
3. Although many people believe the structure and workings of society are a matter of common knowledge, countless sociological findings disprove popular conceptions and provide surprising insights.
4. Sociology is one of the social science disciplines that tries to systematically and objectively understand social life and predict how various influences will affect it. Each social science attempts to accumulate a body of knowledge about a particular aspect of society and the social world. Other social sciences include economics, political science, anthropology, psychology, history, and geography.

## Discussion Questions

1. Explain the sociological perspective, and discuss how it changes the way we look at societies that are different from our own.
2. What is the difference between macrosociology and microsociology? How would each examine police corruption?
3. Explain why common sense knowledge is not the best source of information. With this in mind, discuss why women who are victims of domestic violence stay in abusive relationships.
4. Discuss what the social sciences have in common. How is each unique or different from the others?

## Pop Quiz for Chapter 1

1. What is sociology?
  - a. the study of social life
  - b. the study of common sense and popular wisdom
  - c. a form of socialism
  - d. the study of the autonomy of the individual
2. The term “sociology” was coined by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Comte
  - b. Mills
  - c. Marx
  - d. Durkheim
3. Which of the following would a sociologist probably study?
  - a. how groups influence individual human behavior
  - b. the causes and consequences of a particular system of social order
  - c. the purpose served by a particular social organization
  - d. All of the above



4. Which of the following might sociology focus on at the micro-level of analysis?
- interactions between husbands and wives
  - how divorce rates vary cross-culturally
  - unemployment rates
  - how social change influences the divorce rate of a particular society
5. \_\_\_\_\_ focuses on large-scale structure and process without reference to the relationships of the persons involved.
- Microsociology
  - Macrosociology
  - Political Science
  - Geography
6. Which of the following are the social sciences more likely to have as a goal?
- the direct utilization of knowledge gained through research
  - the acquisition of knowledge
  - the study of both human and nonhuman life
  - defining “what should be” in a society
7. \_\_\_\_\_ is the study of how goods, services, and wealth are produced.
- Anthropology
  - Political Science
  - Sociology
  - Economics
8. A social science that studies physical traits, artifacts, and the shape and size of skulls is \_\_\_\_\_.
- cultural anthropology
  - geography
  - physical anthropology
  - biology
9. Which of the following is more likely to be covered in sociology textbooks?
- psychology
  - clinical social work
  - social psychology
  - applied research
10. According to the insert “How to Read a Table,” where does the source of the information presented usually appear?
- at the bottom of the table
  - right below the title
  - in the footnote area
  - in the column headings
11. Unlike the other social sciences, sociology does not study social institutions. T / F
12. The very heart of sociology is concerned with the complexities and subtleties of human social life. T / F
13. In its most comprehensive sense, sociology includes every aspect of social life. T / F
14. The sociological perspective entails efforts to understand primarily the individual and her/his actions and thoughts. T / F
15. Macrosociology deals with how individuals behave in social situations. T / F

*Answers: 1. a 2. a 3. d 4. a 5. b 6. b 7. d 8. c 9. c 10. a 11. F 12. T 13. T 14. F 15. F*

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