

The Nature and Uses of Sociology



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The Sociology of School Violence

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 5 instructors were shot and killed during two separate incidents that spanned over two and a half hours. After a thorough investigation, the following is an account of what happened on that day.

At 5:00 a.m., Seung-Hui Cho, a 23 year-old English major at Virginia Polytechnic University and State School (Virginia Tech), is sitting at his computer—as noted by one of his suite mates within his dorm. At 5:30 a.m., another suite mate sees Cho putting acne cream on his face in the bathroom, before getting dressed and leaving his dorm room. At 6:47 a.m. Cho is seen outside of West Ambler Johnston Residence Hall, a coed

dormitory on campus. At 7:15 a.m. Cho enters West Ambler Hall, where he shoots and kills his first two victims, 19 year-old first-year student Emily Hilscher and 22 year-old senior, Ryan Clark. Cho lives in Harper Hall, not West Ambler; however, he has access to the secure facility of West Ambler because his mailbox is located within the building. Even though West Ambler Hall is a secure facility, only accessible with a magnetic access card, Cho has a card that allows him access after 7:30 a.m. each day. It is unclear how Cho gains entry into the building earlier than he should have been allowed. It's possible that Cho witnesses Emily Hilscher being dropped off 13 minutes earlier by her boyfriend and selects her as his first victim. When she is confronted and killed by Cho in her room; it is

believed that Ryan Clark, the residence hall advisor, goes to check on the noise. Cho, then, also kills Ryan in Emily's room. While no one knows exactly why Cho chooses Emily Hilscher as his first victim, it had been well documented that in previous years a number of female students had complained of harassing contact by Cho with unwanted emails, text messaging, and letters.

After killing his first two victims, Cho goes back to his own dorm room in Harper Hall, changes out of his bloody clothes, checks and deletes his emails, removes his hard drive, and leaves to get rid of it before heading to the post office. At this same time, police and medical personnel are arriving at West Ambler Hall, having received a call about the first shootings. Believing the killings are isolated, and perhaps the result of a domestic dispute involving Hilscher's boyfriend, police make a decision that will ultimately be the center of much controversy; they choose not to close the campus, but, rather, to allow students to attend classes as normal.

At 9:01 a.m., approximately two hours after the first shootings, Cho arrives at the local post office to mail a package, which contains some of his writings and a videotape of him holding weapons and rambling about his resentment, hatred and possibility of a coming massacre, to NBC News. After leaving the post office, he heads toward Norris Hall, the Engineering Science Building that houses numerous classrooms full of students at this time in the morning.

Upon arriving at Norris Hall, Cho chains the doors and places a note on one door threat-



Seung-Hui Cho committed the worst school shooting in U.S. history at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007. West Ambler Johnston Hall is where the first two victims were killed. (AP Photo)

ening that a bomb would go off if anyone attempts to enter. A faculty member finds the note and takes it to an administrative office located on the third floor, but no call is ever made to authorities concerning the bomb threat. Once safely inside, Cho first enters Room 206, where G. V. Loganathan, an engineering professor from India, is teaching an advanced hydrology course. After killing Loganathan, Cho shoots and kills 9 of the 13 students in the classroom. Next, Cho goes across the hall to Room 207 where Christopher Bishop is teaching an introduction to German course. Like in the previous room, Cho first kills the instructor (Bishop) before killing four students and wounding six others. Cho continues on to other classes killing and injuring numerous people, often returning to rooms more than once during his shooting spree. After police finally gain access to the building, Cho shoots and kills himself in the last classroom before police find him. From beginning to end, the killing in

Norris Hall lasts just 11 minutes, after which 33 people, including Cho, are dead and 17 others are injured. Police determine that Cho fired 174 rounds of ammunition during his rampage and was prepared to use much more if needed.

While Virginia Tech was the scene of the deadliest shooting in U.S. history, there have been many others 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 college was a very safe place to be, a place where crime is limited to petty theft and other non-violent offenses. However, in recent years 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?

To answer these questions, we should first consider what Peter Berger suggests in *Invitation to Sociology*. Berger (1963) suggests that “**the first wisdom of sociology is this—things are not what they seem.**” As a sociology student, you will be asked to examine issues based on a

critical analysis, rather than simply rely on the media or your own personal experiences to answer questions related to social phenomena. Instead, it is best to examine issues from various points of view, particularly those directly affected by the phenomenon. Looking at the history of juvenile violence should provide us some insight into the safety of schools today.

In the early 1990’s, increase in violent crimes by juveniles led some academics to suggest that a “juvenile super-predator” was evolving. These juvenile super-predators were described as sociopaths who had no respect for anyone and were not deterred by the threat of the criminal justice system. It was further suggested that these violent juveniles were different from anyone ever seen before because their DNA were damaged by the drugs and alcohol consumed by their young, unwed mothers. Since then, a number of sensational cases have attracted the attention of the media that bombard us with images of violence and crime on a daily basis. Fear of violence is not just situated within our schools; we are also told to be afraid of workplace violence, serial killers, vicious animal attacks, road rage, and so on.

According to the Safe School Initiative, the possibility of lethal violence occurring at one of the nation’s schools is extremely rare. To put this into perspective, the report indicates that between 1993 and 1997 the chances of a student in grades 9–12 being in a school fight was 1 in 7, being injured with a weapon

1 in 13, and being the victim of homicide while in school—1 in 1,000,000. In fact, children are safer at school than they are in their own homes (2004). Accidents (mainly traffic)

are the number one cause of death for children between 5 to 19 years of age; and while homicide is the second leading cause, a large majority occurs off school property.

Our lives are governed by numerous factors. Throughout this text we will explore a variety of these factors, however others may be examined in your psychology, biology, anthropology, or political science courses; or even through life's journey. We are governed by the society in which we live, by our families and by the global factors that influence our societies. 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. As we will learn later, our culture plays an important role in the types of choices we make and how we are influenced by these social patterns. Nonetheless, by the time we reach college age, social rules are such a

significant part of us that most people obey them without thinking. This, however, does not diminish their importance or pervasiveness.

The answers to many of the questions about which we wonder 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 they choose to admit some people but not others? Have you had an argument with anyone lately? If you have, the chances are that it arose at least in part from having different perceptions about how people should behave. 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; another part is our fear of the unknown—our social behavior is determined by a constant exchange of social cues; and these cues often differ from group to group, place to place, and time to time. Indeed, why are you attending college, taking this course at this school, and reading this book right now?

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 not only has scientific applications, but also personal and occupational applications. Sociology attempts to explain not only the factors that draw group members together, but also what are the countervailing forces that push us apart. Although we may not recognize them, there

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



are reasons for our social behavior; and 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 entire new dimension of social forces that influence us constantly.

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

What is **sociology**? As a science, we should know that sociology is a fairly recent development. Its particular formation developed in the 1800s. However, the notion of social analysis dates back to ancient Kemet (Egypt), where Africans like Imhotep (c. 2650 B.C.E.) and Ptahhotep (2388–2356 B.C.E.) made seminal contributions to social thought. Other important social philosophers began to emerge thousands of years later in India—Siddhārtha Gautama (563 to 483 B.C.E.); in China—Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.); and others in Greece, Rome and beyond. Sociology is a continuation of these traditions and thinkers. Often concepts presented as new amount to a rearticulation or transformation of older ideas. Sociology builds on philosophy, history, mathematics, the natural sciences, psychology, and

ethics. Sociology and sociological thinking emerged in part as a synthesis these other modes of thought and analysis, but also to address the challenging social issues of the day.

Sociology is the scientific study of human behavior, social groups, and society. Sociologists attempt to identify and understand social patterns; and explain how they affect social groups or societies. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) who coined the word *sociology* is often considered to be the founder of the discipline. The term 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.” Five centuries earlier, although overlooked by most sociologists, Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun (c. 1332 C.E.) of North Africa wrote about “the scientific study of society, empirical research, and the search for causes of social phenomena” (Ritzer 1994: 7)¹.

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 urban cities like Newark, New Jersey to talk to mothers about single parenthood. Some might use a survey to investigate

sexual behavior or might study kinship systems (i.e., family relationship patterns) among indigenous groups in South America. Others might look into how college students perceive their professors or how television has influenced family life in the Caribbean.

If you pursued all these approaches, you would probably find yourself with a bewildering variety of ideas about what sociology is. What do they 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 *Careers in Sociology* (2002), 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 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 5, for example, a sociologist might further inquire about a particular social system by asking such questions as: 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?

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, health-care 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.

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). In other words, our experiences guide

our perceptions. Like the blind men who 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 develop not only a sociological imagination, but also a sociological perspective. Sociology is a perspective, a way of critically examining the world, society and the social behavior of individuals, groups, and institutions. What is a **sociological perspective**? It is a conscious effort to question the obvious and to remove ourselves from familiar experiences and examine them critically and objectively. However, although we talk about and strive for objective analysis, we must even be critical of our ability to accomplish this sort of impartiality. Sociology is based on *empirical* (on observation or experiment), which aids us in determining whether our generalizations about the social world 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. It enables us to consider issues such as employment, income, education, gender, age, and race—and how these and other external forces influence people's experiences. Using a sociological perspective gives us an opportunity to step outside of our intellectual comfort zones as we attempt to understand the world around us and our own societies.

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 societies we live in.

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 support of O. J. Simpson by African Americans and the disdain towards him felt by European Americans during his murder trial. It may be difficult to understand the anger of people in a neighborhood when children are bused to a school in a

Attorney Yale Galanter, left, with client O. J. Simpson as the judge reads the verdict.
(AP Photo/Pool, Amy E. Conn)



different neighborhood. Behaviors such as these reflect 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 have transitioned 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 divorcee 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.

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 alone responsible for your own condition or destiny?
 2. In regard to school shootings, how does the sociological imagination help us to understand the events at Virginia Tech University?
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Sociology and Popular Wisdom

It is widely assumed, sometimes accurately so, that research findings tend to support what we already

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. (iStock)



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 school 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, a fear of dying increases with age.

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 (see Table 1-1) 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 at autopsy that Whitman had a brain tumor. The study also found that school shooters rarely “snap” but, rather, display behavior that concerns others prior to the incident. Seung Hui Cho, (see Table 1-1) the Virginia Tech shooter, had several teachers note his suicidal and homicidal ideation while he was in the 8th 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 overly violent.

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 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 Jenson (2006), approximately 7.3 million persons living in rural communities are poor. In 2005, 15.1 percent of the rural population was living in poverty, compared to 12.5 percent 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 percent, living in rural communities are poor, a number higher than urban children from all minority groups. Lack of job

TABLE 1-1 SCHOOL SHOOTINGS IN THE UNITED STATES FROM 1966 TO 2008

DATE	CITY	DESCRIPTION
8/1/1966	Austin, TX	Charles Whitman (25) kills 15 and wounds 31 on the University of Texas campus in Austin.
7/12/1976	Fullerton, CA	Custodian Edward Allaway (37) kills seven fellow employees inside the Cal State Fullerton campus library.
1/29/1979	San Diego, CA	Brenda Ann Spencer (16) opens fire on an elementary school across the street from her house. She kills the principal and a custodian and wounds eight children and a police officer.
1/20/1983	St. Louis, MO	David Lawler (14), an eighth grader at Parkway South Jr. High School, shoots two students and then commits suicide.
1/21/1985	Goddard, KS	James Kearbey (14) kills the principal and wounds two teachers and a student at Goddard Jr. High School.
5/28/1988	Winnetka, IL	Laurie Dann (30) opens fire at an elementary school, kills a second grader and wounds five other students.
9/26/1988	Greenwood, SC	James Wilson (19) opens fire at an elementary school killing two eight-year old girls and wounding five other students and two teachers.
1/17/1989	Stockton, CA	Patrick Purdy, a drifter, opens fire on an elementary school playground killing five children and wounding 29 others and two children.
11/1/1991	Iowa City, IA	Gang Lu (28) a graduate student in the Physics Department at the University of Iowa kills five employees, including four physics professors, and wounds two others.
12/14/1992	Great Barrington, MA	Wayne Lo (18), a student at Simon's Rock College of Bard, shoots and kills one student and a professor.
11/15/1995	Lynnville, TN	Jaime Rouse (17), a student at Richland High School, kills one student, a teacher, and seriously wounds another.
2/2/1996	Moses Lake, WA	Barry Loukaitis (14) walks into his junior high school algebra class and kills his teacher and two students.
8/15/1996	San Diego, CA	Frederick Davidson (36) an engineering graduate student at San Diego State was defending his thesis when he pulls a gun and kills 3 of his professors.
2/19/1997	Bethel, AK	Evan Ramsey (16) kills one student and the principal, and wounds two others at his high school.
10/1/1997	Pearl, MS	Luke Woodham (16) shoots nine students at Pearl High School, killing two. Before the school shooting, Woodham beat and stabbed his mother to death.
12/1/1997	West Paducah, KY	Michael Carneal (14) opens fire on a group of students praying before school, killing three students and wounding five others.
3/24/1998	Jonesboro, AR	Mitchell Johnson (13) and Andrew Golden (11) pull the fire alarm at their school and then hide in the woods to open fire on the children and teachers exiting the building. They kill four girls and a teacher, and injure 10 others.
5/19/1998	Fayetteville, TN	Jacob Davis (18) kills one classmate three days before graduation.
5/21/1998	Springfield, OR	Kip Kinkel (17) kills his parents before heading to school. Once there, he opens fire, killing two students and wounding 25 others.

Source: Virginia Tech Review Panel and News Reports

TABLE 1-1 SCHOOL SHOOTINGS IN THE UNITED STATES FROM 1966 TO 2008, CONTINUED

DATE	CITY	DESCRIPTION
2/29/1999	Mount Morris Township, MI	Derrick Owens (6) brings a gun to school and shoots a six year-old female classmate with whom he had argued the previous day.
4/20/1999	Littleton, CO	Eric Harris (18) and Dylan Klebold (17) kills 12 students and a teacher, and wound 23 others at Columbine High School.
11/19/1999	Deming, NM	Victor Cordova (12) shoots one at his middle school.
3/10/2000	Savannah, GA	Darrell Ingram (19) kills two students who are leaving a school dance.
5/26/2000	Lake Worth, FL	Nathaniel Brazill (13) kills his English teacher on the last day of classes.
3/5/2001	Santee, CA	Charles Andrew Williams (15) opens fire on his high school, killing two students and wounding 13 others.
3/30/2001	Gary, IN	Donald R. Burt Jr. (17) kills one student outside his high school.
5/15/2001	Ennis, TX	A 16 year-old student shoots and kills his girlfriend and then himself. He held 17 students hostage.
1/16/2002	Grundy, VA	Peter Odighizuwa (42) kills the Dean, a professor, and a student at the Appalachian School of Law.
10/28/2002	Tucson, AZ	Robert Flores (40) kills three of his nursing school professors at the University of Arizona Nursing College.
4/24/2003	Red Lion, PA	A 14 year-old junior high school student shoots and kills the principal in the cafeteria.
9/24/2003	Cold Springs, MN	John McLaughlin (15) kills two students at Rocori High School.
3/21/2005	Red Lake Indian Reservation, TN	Jeff Weise (16) kills his grandfather and his grandfather's girlfriend before going to school where he killed five students, a teacher and a security guard, and wounded seven others.
11/8/2005	Jacksboro, TN	Kenneth Bartley Jr. (15) kills one administrator and wounds two others at Campbell County High School.
8/24/2006	Essex, VT	Christopher Williams (27) goes into Essex Elementary School looking for his girlfriend, a teacher. When he can't locate her, he kills one teacher and wounds another. He also killed his girlfriend's mother.
8/30/2006	Hillsborough, NC	A student kills his father before going to his high school and shooting two students.
9/2/2006	Shepherdstown, WV	During a visit to Shepherdstown University, Douglas Pennington (46) shoots and kills his two sons and then himself.
9/17/2006	Pittsburgh, PA	On the campus of Duquesne University, five basketball players are shot after a school dance.
9/27/2006	Bailey, CO	Duane Morrison (53) takes 6 female students hostage at Platte Canyon High School and sexually assaults them. He releases four and then opens fire on the other two, killing one.
9/29/2006	Cazenovia, WI	Eric Hainstock (15) shoots and kills his principal.

(continues)

TABLE 1-1 SCHOOL SHOOTINGS IN THE UNITED STATES FROM 1966 TO 2008, CONTINUED

DATE	CITY	DESCRIPTION
10/2/2006	Nickel Mines, PA	Charles Roberts IV (32) takes hostage all the female students of a one-room Amish schoolhouse. He sexually assaults them before shooting and killing five of the girls and wounding six others.
1/3/2007	Tacoma, WA	Douglas Chantabouly (18) kills one student at Henry Foss High School.
4/16/2007	Blacksburg, VA	Seung-Hui Cho (23) kills 32, including students and professors at Virginia Tech University. He wounded 25 more students before killing himself.
10/10/2007	Cleveland, OH	Asa Coon (14), student at SuccessTech Academy, shoots two students and two teachers before killing himself.
2/14/2008	DeKalb, IL	Steven Kazmierczak (27), a sociology graduate student at Northern Illinois University, opens fire in a classroom killing five students and wounding 16 others.
2/14/2008	Oxnard, CA	Brandon McInerney (14) kills one student in a classroom at E.O. Green Junior High School.
11/13/2008	Fort Lauderdale, FL	A 15 year-old female student shoots and kills a fellow classmate.

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 is not a deterrent to murder or 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 are higher for males than for females in most countries, including the United States, there are some countries where females are

more likely to commit suicide. For example, in China, Cuba, Ecuador, Sri Lanka, and El Salvador the rate of suicide is higher for females than for males (See Table 1-2). According to the National Institute of Health, the mean suicide rate for persons between the ages of 15–19 years, globally, is 7.4 per 100,000. The rate for males is 10.5 per 100,000 and for females it is 4.1 per 100,000. Social pressures and gender expectations differ among cultures and contribute to the differences in suicide rates.

The fifth statement suggests a fear of dying increases with age as the likelihood of death approaches. A Gallup Poll survey (January 1991) revealed that the fear of death actually diminishes, rather than increases, with age. About one-third (33 percent) of Americans ages 18 to 29 years old said that they fear death, compared to one-fourth (25 percent) of those ages 30 to 49, and only one-sixth (16 percent) of those age 50 and older. Interestingly, the survey revealed that being religious, irrespective of age, did not make much difference in fearing death; in fact, those who claimed to have no religion at all were the least likely to fear death.



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. (iStock)

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 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 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 realizing 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.

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 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 **social sciences** are just as natural as those that the natural sciences embrace.

TABLE 1-2 SUICIDE NUMBERS AND RATES PER 100,000 YOUNG PERSONS AGED 15–19 IN SELECT COUNTRIES

COUNTRY (AREA)	YEAR	NUMBER			RATE		
		MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
Sri Lanka	1986	388	424	812	43.9	49.3	46.5
Russian Federation	2002	2,384	499	2,883	38.5	8.3	23.6
New Zealand	2000	31	11	42	22.3	8.2	15.3
El Salvador	1993	44	52	96	13.2	15.8	14.5
Ireland	2000	34	7	41	19.8	4.3	12.3
Norway	2001	21	8	29	15.3	6.2	10.9
Canada	2000	173	52	225	16.3	5.2	10.8
Finland	2002	25	6	31	15.0	3.8	9.5
Belgium	1997	46	12	58	14.5	3.9	9.3
Cuba	1996	23	45	68	6.1	12.5	9.2
Ecuador	1991	40	64	104	6.9	11.4	9.1
Australia	2001	95	25	120	13.8	3.8	8.9
Poland	2001	242	39	281	14.1	2.4	8.4
Switzerland	2000	27	8	35	12.6	4.0	8.4
USA	2000	1,347	269	1,616	13.0	2.7	8.0
Japan	2000	335	138	473	8.8	3.8	6.4
Germany	2001	207	54	261	8.7	2.4	5.6
Hong Kong	1999	12	12	24	5.1	5.3	5.2
France	1999	150	48	198	7.5	2.5	5.0
Denmark	1999	13	1	14	9.0	0.7	4.9
Netherlands	2000	35	8	43	7.4	1.8	4.6
Sweden	2001	15	7	22	5.7	2.8	4.3
Brazil	1995	286	128	414	5.7	2.6	4.2
United Kingdom	1999	122	33	155	6.5	1.8	4.2
China	1999	179	253	432	3.2	4.8	4.0
Mexico	1995	263	117	380	5.1	2.3	3.7
Spain	2000	71	18	89	5.3	1.4	3.4
Italy	2000	57	25	82	3.6	1.7	2.7

Table was shortened from the original 90 countries cited in *World Psychiatry* for illustration purposes.

Source: *World Psychiatry*. 2005 June; 4(2): 114–120.

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 and understanding the nature of social science, in general, and of sociology, in particular.

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 deficits, or per-capita

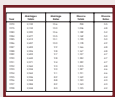
income may seem to belong more to the realm of statistics or mathematics than to social science, but these statistics reflect individual behavior, the relationships among groups, and the functioning of society. The effects of supply and demand on prices and the distribution and consumption of material goods serve as indicators of social exchange. Although sociologists also study factors such as these, they devote their attention to different aspects of them. Unlike sociologists, few economists pay much 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, but 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 studies 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, like sociology, is a broad and varied discipline. It includes physical anthropology, archaeology, cultural history, social linguistics, and



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



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 1-2) 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 1-2 informs us that this table includes information about suicide numbers and rates of persons between the ages of 15–19 years from 1970 through 2005 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; it helps us judge how reliable the information is. In Table 1-2, the data come from a study conducted by World Psychiatry in 2005.

- 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, or why the data were presented as they were. Table 1-2 includes a footnote that lets the reader know the number of countries was/were reduced from the original table presented by World Psychiatry for purposes of illustration. 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 the total number of suicides for all 90 countries can access the data from the published study in the cited source.

social and cultural anthropology. *Physical anthropologists* attempt to understand both primitive 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 so-

ciologists 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 is concerned primarily with human mental processes and individual human behavior. Frequent areas of study include learning, human de-

How to Read a Table, *continued*

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 1-2, you will see a couple of levels of headings. The top 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. Looking back at Table 1-2, by looking at the vertical column we see 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 you will also often use the ability to read and interpret tables in your personal and professional life.

velopment, 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 social groups and of how social behavior influences the individual. *Sociol-*

ogy deals primarily with groups and social systems. Much of the material covered in sociology textbooks technically is considered to be social psychology.

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 therefore 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, 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, 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.

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; but the two actually can be considered to occupy different points on the same continuum. 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 spouse 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.

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 social workers? Are social workers sociologists? Explain your answers.
-

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 sciences*, which are disciplines that try 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.

KEY TERMS

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

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

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

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

macrosociology A level of sociological analysis concerned with large-scale units such as institutions, social categories, and social systems

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

political science The study of power, government, and the political process

psychology The study of human mental processes and individual human behavior

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

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

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

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

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

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

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain sociological perspective and discuss how it changes the way we look at societies 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?

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ See Appendix and Taylor, Orville W., 2003 “Re-Appropriating the Stolen Legacy: The African Contribution to the Origin of Sociological Thought.” in *Ideaz*. 2:1, 6–19.