

Putting Social Life into Perspective

Sociology is the systematic study of human society and social interaction. It is a *systematic* study because sociologists apply both theoretical perspectives and research methods (or orderly approaches) to examinations of social behavior. Sociologists study human societies and their social interactions to develop theories of how human behavior is shaped by group life and how, in turn, group life is affected by individuals. Sociological studies range in size from a focus on entire nations and large-scale organizations and institutions to an analysis of small groups and individual interactions. To better understand the scope of sociology, you might compare it to other social sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, economics, and political science. Like anthropology, sociology studies many aspects of human behavior; however, sociology is particularly interested in contemporary social organization, relations, and social change. Anthropology primarily concentrates on human existence over geographic space and evolutionary time, meaning that it focuses more on traditional societies and the development of diverse cultures. Cultural anthropology most closely overlaps sociology. Unlike psychology, sociology examines the individual in relation to *external* factors, such as the effects of groups, organizations, and social institutions on individuals and social life; psychology primarily focuses on *internal* factors relating to the individual in explanations of human behavior and mental processes—what occurs in the mind. Social psychology is similar to sociology in that it emphasizes how social conditions affect individual behavior. Although sociology examines all major social institutions, including the economy and politics, the fields of economics and political science concentrate primarily on a single institution—the economy or the political system. Topics of mutual interest to economics and sociology include issues such as consumerism and debt, which can be analyzed at global, national, and individual levels. Topics of mutual interest to political science and sociology are how political systems are organized and how power is distributed in society. As you can see, sociology shares similarities with other social sciences but offers a comprehensive approach to understanding many aspects of social life.

Why Should You Study Sociology?

Sociology helps us gain a better understanding of ourselves and our social world. Sociology offers us new insights into our lives as well as an opportunity to learn about other people. It enables us to see how

behavior is largely shaped by the groups to which we belong and the society in which we live. By studying sociology, you can gain valuable new tools that will help you in daily life and provide important insights into your interactions with others.

Most of us take our social world for granted and view our lives in very personal terms. Because of our culture's emphasis on individualism, we often do not consider the complex connections between our lives and the larger, recurring patterns of the society and world in which we live. Sociology helps us look beyond our personal experiences and gain insights into society and the larger world order. A **society is a large social grouping that shares the same geographical territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations**, such as the United States, Mexico, or Nigeria. Examining the world order helps us understand that each of us is affected by *global interdependence*—a relationship in which the lives of all people are intertwined closely and any one nation's problems are part of a larger global problem.

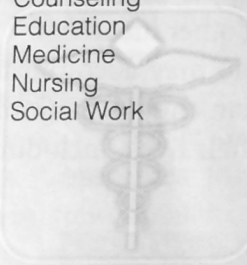
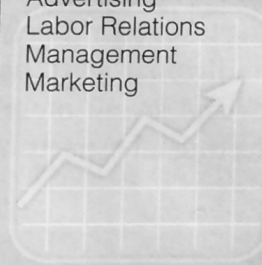
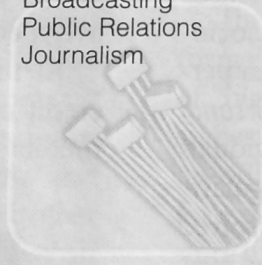
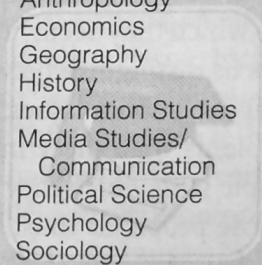
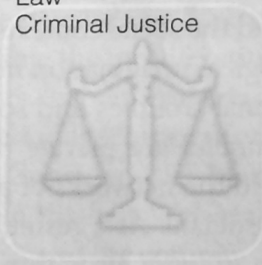
Individuals can make use of sociology on a more personal level. Sociology enables us to move beyond established ways of thinking, thus allowing us to gain new insights into ourselves and to develop a greater awareness of the connection between our own "world" and that of other people. According to the sociologist Peter Berger (1963: 23), sociological inquiry helps us see that "things are not what they seem." Sociology provides new ways of approaching problems and making decisions in everyday life. Sociology also promotes understanding and tolerance by enabling each of us to look beyond our personal experiences (see ► Figure 1.1).

Many of us rely on intuition or common sense gained from personal experience to help us understand our daily lives and other people's behavior. *Commonsense knowledge* guides ordinary conduct in everyday life. We often rely on common sense—or "what everybody knows"—to answer key questions about behavior: Why do people behave the way they do? Who makes the rules? Why do some people break rules and other people follow rules?

Many commonsense notions are actually myths. A *myth* is a popular but false notion that may be used, either intentionally or unintentionally, to perpetuate certain beliefs or "theories" even in the light of conclusive evidence to the contrary. For example, one widely held myth is that "money can buy happiness." By contrast, sociologists strive to use scientific standards, not popular myths or hearsay, in studying society and social interaction. They use systematic research techniques and are accountable to the scientific community for their methods and the presentation of their findings. Although some

True	False	
T	F	1. The average U.S. household owes more than \$10,000 in credit card debt.
T	F	2. The average debt owed on undergraduate college students' credit cards is less than \$1,000.
T	F	3. Fewer than half of all undergraduate students at four-year colleges have at least one credit card.
T	F	4. College students spend more money online than people in any other age category.
T	F	5. Consumer activist groups have been successful in getting Congress to pass a law requiring people under age 21 to get parental approval or show that they have sufficient income prior to obtaining a credit card.
T	F	6. More than one million people in this country file for bankruptcy each year.
T	F	7. If we added up all consumer debt in the United States, we would find that the total amount owed is more than \$1.5 trillion.
T	F	8. Overspending is primarily a problem for people in the higher-income brackets in the United States and other affluent nations.

Answers on page 6.

Health and Human Services	Business	Communication	Academia	Law
Counseling Education Medicine Nursing Social Work 	Advertising Labor Relations Management Marketing 	Broadcasting Public Relations Journalism 	Anthropology Economics Geography History Information Studies Media Studies/ Communication Political Science Psychology Sociology 	Law Criminal Justice 

▲ FIGURE 1.1 FIELDS THAT USE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

In many careers, including jobs in health and human services, business, communication, academia, and law, the ability to analyze social science research is an important asset.

Source: Based on Katzer, Cook, and Crouch, 1991.

sociologists argue that sociology must be completely value free—without distorting subjective (personal or emotional) bias—others do not think that total objectivity is an attainable or desirable goal when studying human behavior. However, all sociologists attempt to discover patterns or commonalities in human behavior. For example, when they study shopping behavior or credit card abuse, sociologists look for recurring patterns of behavior and for larger, structural factors that contribute to people's behavior. Women's studies scholar Juliet B. Schor, who wrote *The Overspent American* (1999: 68), refers to consumption as the “see–want–borrow–buy” process, which she believes is a comparative process in which desire is structured by what we see around us. As sociologists examine patterns such as these, they begin to use the sociological imagination.

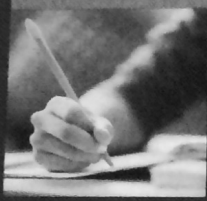
The Sociological Imagination

How can we make a connection between our personal experiences and what goes on in the larger society? Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959b) described the process of making this linkage the **sociological imagination**—the ability to see the relationship

sociology the systematic study of human society and social interaction.

society a large social grouping that shares the same geographical territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations.

sociological imagination C. Wright Mills's term for the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society.



ANSWERS to the Sociology Quiz on Consumption and Credit Cards

1. **True.** The credit card debt owed by the average U.S. household (that had credit card debt) in 2009 was \$15,788.
2. **False.** The average debt on undergraduate college students' credit cards in 2009 was about \$3,173.
3. **False.** About 84 percent of undergraduate college students have at least one credit card.
4. **True.** College students are the biggest spenders online, and most of the purchases are for clothing.
5. **True.** Aggressive marketing of credit cards to college students is illegal. The 2009 Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure (CARD) Act made it illegal for banks and credit card companies to continue the business practice of routinely sending out mailings and engaging in campus solicitations for new cardholders.
6. **True.** In the United States, 1.4 million people filed for bankruptcy in 2009.
7. **True.** The U.S. total was about \$2.5 trillion when all consumer debt was taken into account in 2009, amounting to nearly \$8,100 in debt for every person living in this country.
8. **False.** People in all income brackets have problems with overspending, including excessive use of credit and not paying off debts in a timely manner, at least partly due to difficult economic times.

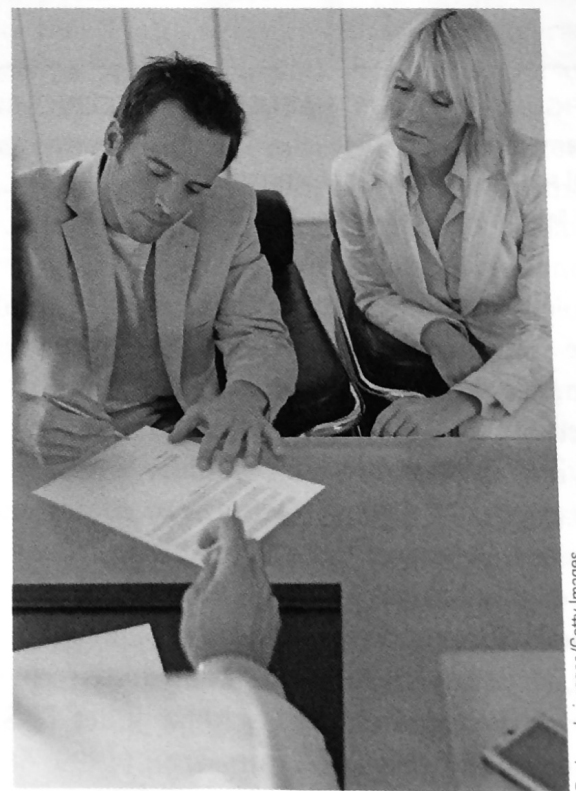
Sources: Based on SallieMae.com, 2009; and Woolsey and Schulz, 2010.

between individual experiences and the larger society. This sociological awareness enables us to understand the link between our personal experiences and the social contexts in which they occur. The sociological imagination helps us distinguish between personal troubles and social (or public) issues. *Personal troubles* are private problems that affect individuals and the networks of people with which they regularly associate. As a result, those problems must be solved by individuals within their immediate social settings. For example, one person being unemployed or running up a high credit card debt could be identified as a personal trouble. *Public issues* are problems that affect large numbers of people and often require solutions at the societal level. Widespread unemployment and massive, nationwide consumer debt are examples of public issues. The sociological imagination helps us place seemingly personal troubles, such as losing one's job or overspending on credit cards, into a larger social context, where we can distinguish whether and how personal troubles may be related to public issues.

Overspending as a Personal Trouble Although individual behavior can contribute to social problems, our individual experiences are largely beyond the individual's control. They are influenced and in some situations determined by the society as a whole—by its historical development and its organization. In everyday life we often blame individuals for “creating” their own problems. If a person sinks into debt due to overspending or credit card abuse, many people consider it to be the result of his or her own personal failings. However, this approach overlooks debt

among people who are in low-income brackets, having no way other than debt to gain the basic necessities of life. By contrast, at middle- and upper-income levels, overspending takes on a variety of other meanings.

At the individual level, people may accumulate credit cards and spend more than they can afford, thereby affecting all aspects of their lives, including



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▲ Because of an over-reliance on credit, many Americans now owe more than they can pay back. This couple is signing up for debt consolidation, a somewhat controversial process that may help them avoid bankruptcy.

health, family relationships, and employment stability. Sociologist George Ritzer (1999: 29) suggests that people may overspend through a gradual process in which credit cards “lure people into consumption by easy credit and then entice them into still further consumption by offers of ‘payment holidays,’ new cards, and increased credit limits.”

Overspending as a Public Issue We can use the sociological imagination to look at the problem of overspending and credit card debt as a public issue—a societal problem. For example, Ritzer (1998) suggests that the relationship between credit card debt and the relatively low *savings rate* in the United States constitutes a public issue. Between 2000 and 2010, credit card debt continued to grow rapidly in the United States while savings diminished. Because savings is money that governments, businesses, and individuals can borrow for expansion, a lack of savings may create problems for future economic growth. The rate of bankruptcies in this country is a problem both for financial institutions and the government. As corporations “write off” bad debt from those who declare bankruptcy or simply do not pay their bills, all consumers pay either directly or indirectly for that debt. Finally, poverty is forgotten as a social issue when more-affluent people are having a spending holiday and consuming all, or more than, they can afford to purchase. Some practices of the credit card industry are also a public issue because they harm consumers. Companies may encourage overspending and then substantially increase interest rates and other fees, making it more difficult for consumers to pay off debts. Mills’s *The Sociological Imagination* (1959b) is useful for examining issues because it helps integrate microlevel (individual and small-group) troubles with compelling public issues of our day. Recently, his ideas have been applied at the global level as well.

The Importance of a Global Sociological Imagination

Although existing sociological theory and research provide the foundation for sociological thinking, we must reach beyond past studies that have focused primarily on the United States to develop a more comprehensive *global* approach for the future. In the twenty-first century, we face important challenges in a rapidly changing nation and world. The world’s **high-income countries are nations with highly industrialized economies; technologically advanced industrial, administrative, and service occupations; and relatively high levels of national and personal income.** Examples include the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the countries of Western Europe (see ► Map 1.1).

As compared with other nations of the world, many high-income nations have a high standard of living and a lower death rate due to advances in nutrition and medical technology. However, everyone living in a so-called high-income country does not necessarily have a high income or an outstanding quality of life. Even among middle-income and upper-income people, problems such as personal debt may threaten economic and social stability.

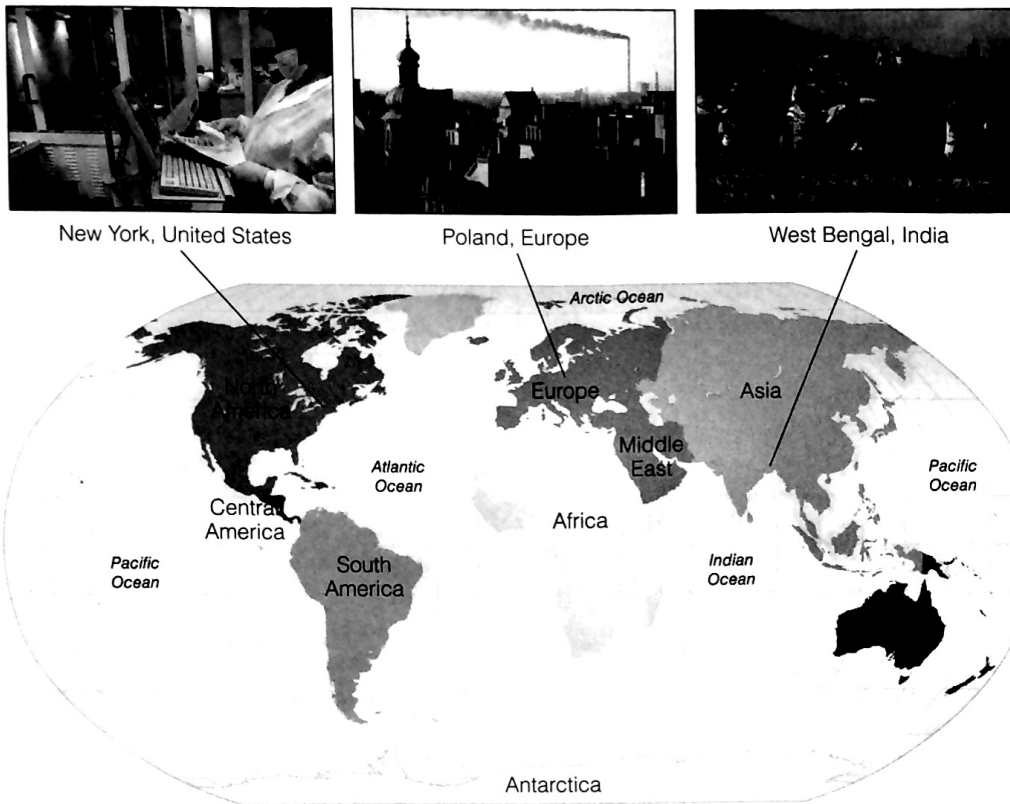
In contrast, **middle-income countries are nations with industrializing economies, particularly in urban areas, and moderate levels of national and personal income.** Examples of middle-income countries include the nations of Eastern Europe and many Latin American countries, where nations such as Brazil and Mexico are industrializing rapidly. **Low-income countries are primarily agrarian nations with little industrialization and low levels of national and personal income.** Examples of low-income countries include many of the nations of Africa and Asia, particularly the People’s Republic of China and India, where people typically work the land and are among the poorest in the world. However, generalizations are difficult to make because there are wide differences in income and standards of living within many nations (see Chapter 9, “Global Stratification”).

The global expansion of credit cards and other forms of consumerism, including the proliferation of “big-box” retail establishments such as Wal-Mart, shows the influence of U.S.-based megacorporations on other nations of the world. Consider Wal-Mart, for example. Sam Walton opened his first Wal-Mart store in Rogers, Arkansas, in 1962, and the company’s home office was established in Bentonville, Arkansas, in the early 1970s. From a small-scale, regional operation in Arkansas, the Wal-Mart chain has now built a worldwide empire. Although the global expansion of credit cards and Wal-Mart Supercenters has produced benefits for some people, it has also affected the everyday lives of many individuals around the world (see “Sociology in Global Perspective”).

high-income countries (sometimes referred to as **industrial countries**) nations with highly industrialized economies; technologically advanced industrial, administrative, and service occupations; and relatively high levels of national and personal income.

middle-income countries (sometimes referred to as **developing countries**) nations with industrializing economies and moderate levels of national and personal income.

low-income countries (sometimes referred to as **underdeveloped countries**) primarily agrarian nations with little industrialization and low levels of national and personal income.



▲ MAP 1.1 THE WORLD'S ECONOMIES IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

High-income, middle-income, and low-income countries.

Photos: Left, © Syracuse Newspapers/John Berry/The Image Works; center, © Andrew Ward/Life File/Getty Images; right, © DEA/M. BORCHI/Getty Images

Throughout this text we will continue to develop our sociological imaginations by examining social life in the United States and other nations. The future of our nation is deeply intertwined with the future of all other nations of the world on economic, political, environmental, and humanitarian levels. Whatever your race/ethnicity, class, sex, or age, are you able to include in your thinking the perspectives of people who are quite different from you in experiences and points of view? Before you answer this question, a few definitions are in order. *Race* is a term used by many people to specify groups of people distinguished by physical characteristics such as skin color; in fact, there are no “pure” racial types, and the concept of race is considered by most sociologists to be a social construction that people use to justify existing social inequalities. *Ethnicity* refers to the cultural heritage or identity of a group and is based on factors such as language or country of origin. *Class* is the relative location of a person or group within the larger society, based on wealth, power, prestige, or other valued resources. *Sex* refers to the biological and anatomical differences between females and males. By contrast, *gender* refers to the meanings, beliefs, and practices associated with sex differences, referred to as *femininity* and *masculinity*.

In forming your own global sociological imagination and in seeing the possibilities for sociology

in the twenty-first century, it will be helpful for you to understand the development of the discipline.

The Origins of Sociological Thinking

Throughout history, social philosophers and religious authorities have made countless observations about human behavior, but the first systematic analysis of society is found in the philosophies of early Greek philosophers such as Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.). For example, Aristotle was concerned with developing a system of knowledge, and he engaged in theorizing and the empirical analysis of data collected from people in Greek cities regarding their views about social life when ruled by kings or aristocracies or when living in democracies (Collins, 1994). However, early thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle provided thoughts on what they believed society *ought* to be like, rather than describing how society actually *was*.

Social thought began to change rapidly in the seventeenth century with the scientific revolution. Like their predecessors in the natural sciences, social thinkers sought to develop a scientific understanding of social life, believing that their work might enable people to reach their full potential. The contributions of Isaac Newton (1642–1727) to modern science,