His name was Josh Evans. He was 16 years old. And he was hot.

“Mom! Mom! Mom! Look at him!” Tina Meier recalls her daughter saying.

Josh had contacted Megan Meier through her MySpace page and wanted to be added as a friend.

“Yes, he’s cute,” Tina Meier told her daughter. “Do you know who he is?”

“No, but look at him! He’s hot! Please, please, can I add him?”

Mom said yes. And for six weeks Megan and Josh—under Tina’s watchful eye—became acquainted in the virtual world of MySpace.

Josh said he was born in Florida and recently had moved to O’Fallon [Missouri]. He was homeschooled. He played the guitar and drums.

As for 13-year-old Megan . . . [she] loved swimming, boating, fishing, dogs, rap music and boys.

But her life had not always been easy, her mother says. She was heavy and for years had tried to lose weight. She had attention deficit disorder and battled depression. . . . But things were going exceptionally well. She had shed 20 pounds, getting down to 175. She was 5 foot 5½ inches tall.

Part of the reason for Megan’s rosy outlook was Josh, Tina says. After school Megan would
rush to the computer. . . . It did seem odd, Tina says, that Josh never asked for Megan’s phone number. And when Megan asked for his, she says, Josh said he didn’t have a cell and his mother did not yet have a landline.

And then on Sunday, Oct. 15, 2006, Megan received a puzzling and disturbing message from Josh. Tina recalls that it said, “I don’t know if I want to be friends with you anymore because I’ve heard that you are not very nice to your friends.”

Frantic, Megan shot back: “What are you talking about?” (Pokin, 2007)

This and other hostile instant message exchanges set into motion the final, disturbing episode in the life of Megan Meier, as she was suddenly confronted with not only the anger and cynicism of a young man she thought she knew and trusted but also the bullying of other young people gathered on the social networking site MySpace who also sent a barrage of hate-filled messages that called Megan a liar and much worse.

“Mom, they’re being Horrible!” Megan said, sobbing into the phone when her mother called. After an hour, Megan ran into her bedroom and hanged herself with a belt.

“She felt there was no way out,” Ms. Meier said. (Maag, 2007)

—the parents of Megan Meier recalling the events leading up to her suicide at only thirteen years of age

Chapter Focus Question

How do sociological theory and research add to our knowledge of human societies and social issues such as suicide?
Clearly, the suicide of Megan deeply touched her parents and friends while raising many issues about the problem of cyber-bullying. In the aftermath of Megan’s tragic death, her parents tried to send an instant message to Josh Evans to inform him about the destructive nature of his actions, only to learn that his MySpace account had been deleted. Six weeks after Megan’s death, her parents learned that Josh Evans never existed: His fake persona allegedly had been created by a mother whose daughter was once Megan’s friend. According to some media reports, this parent created a fake MySpace account for “Josh Evans” so that she could find out what Megan would say about her daughter and other people. Subsequently, other members gathered on MySpace and—not knowing that Josh Evans did not exist—jumped into the fray and began hurling accusations at Megan and bullying her. A local ordinance in Megan’s hometown now prohibits any harassment that uses the Internet, text messaging services, or any other electronic medium.

Although we will never know the full story of Megan’s life, this tragic occurrence brings us to a larger sociological question: Why does anyone commit suicide? Is suicide purely an individual phenomenon, or is it related to our social interactions and the social environment and society in which we live?

In this chapter, we examine how sociological theories and research can help us understand the seemingly individualistic act of taking one’s own life. We will see how sociological theory and research methods might be used to answer complex questions, and we will wrestle with some of the difficulties that sociologists experience as they study human behavior.

## Why Study Sociology?

Sociology helps us gain a better understanding of ourselves and our social world. It enables us to see how behavior is largely shaped by the groups to which we belong and the society in which we live. 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.

Environmental problems are an example: People throughout the world share the same biosphere—the zone of the Earth’s surface and atmosphere that sustains life. When environmental degradation, such as removing natural resources or polluting the air and water, takes place in one region, it may have an adverse effect on people around the globe.

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. For this reason, people with a knowledge of sociology are employed in a variety of fields that apply sociological insights to everyday life (see Figure 1.1).

Sociology promotes understanding and tolerance by enabling each of us to look beyond intuition, common sense, and our personal experiences. 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. However, 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. Before reading on, take the quiz in the Sociology and Everyday Life box on page 6.
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. Whereas some sociologists argue that sociology must be completely value free—free from 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. When they study suicide, for example, they look for recurring patterns of behavior even though individual people usually commit the acts and other individuals suffer as a result of these actions.

Consequently, sociologists seek out the multiple causes and effects of suicide or other social issues. They analyze the impact of the problem not only from the standpoint of the people directly involved but also from the standpoint of the effects of such behavior on all people.

The Sociological Imagination

Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959b) described sociological reasoning as the sociological imagination—the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society. This 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 whom they associate regularly. As a result, those problems must be solved by individuals within their immediate social settings. For example, one person being unemployed may be a personal trouble. Public issues are problems that affect large numbers of people and often require solutions at the societal level. Widespread unemployment as a result of economic changes such as plant closings is an example of a public issue. The sociological imagination helps us place seemingly personal troubles, such as losing one’s job or feeling like committing suicide, into a larger social context, where we can distinguish whether and how personal troubles may be related to public issues.

Suicide as a Personal Trouble Many of our individual experiences may be largely beyond our own control. They are determined by society as a
whole—by its historical development and its organization. In everyday life, we do not define personal experiences in these terms. If a person commits suicide, many people consider it to be the result of his or her own personal problems.

**Suicide as a Public Issue** We can also use the sociological imagination to look at the problem of suicide as a public issue—a societal problem. Early sociologist Émile Durkheim refused to accept common-sense explanations of suicide. In what is probably the first sociological study to use scientific research methods, he related suicide to the issue of cohesiveness (or lack of cohesiveness) in society instead of viewing suicide as an isolated act that could be understood only by studying individual personalities or inherited tendencies. In *Suicide* (1964b/1897), Durkheim documented his contention that a high suicide rate was symptomatic of large-scale societal problems.

**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 (see Map 1.1). 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. Some examples are the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the countries of Western Europe.

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. In contrast, *middle-income countries* are nations with industrializing economies, particularly in urban areas, and moderate levels of national and personal income. Some examples of middle-income countries are the nations of Eastern Europe and many Latin American countries, where nations such as Brazil and Mexico are industrializing rapidly.

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**How Much Do You Know About Suicide?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 1. For people thinking of suicide, it is difficult, if not impossible, to see the bright side of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 2. People who talk about suicide don’t do it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 3. Suicide rates in the United States are highest for Asian/Pacific Islanders because of pressure to achieve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 4. Rates of suicide are highest in the intermountain states located in the western and northwestern regions of the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 5. Females complete suicide (take their own life) at a much higher rate than that of males.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 6. Over half of all suicides occur in adult women between the ages of 25 and 65.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 7. Older women have lower rates of both attempted and completed suicide than older men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 8. Children don’t know enough to be able to intentionally kill themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 9. Suicide rates for African Americans are higher than for white Americans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F 10. More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease combined.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Answers on page 8.*
Low-income countries are primarily agrarian nations with little industrialization and low levels of national and personal income. Examples of low-income countries are many of the nations of Africa and Asia, particularly India and the People’s Republic of China, 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 8, “Global Stratification”). Throughout this text, we will continue to develop our sociological imaginations by examining social life in the United States and other nations.

Developing a better understanding of diversity and tolerance for people who are different from us is important for our personal, social, and economic well-being. Whatever your race/ethnicity, class, sex, or age, are you able to include in your thinking the perspectives of people who are quite dissimilar in experiences and points of view? Before answering 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...
1. True. To people thinking of suicide, an acknowledgment that there is a bright side only confirms and conveys the message that they have failed; otherwise, they could see the bright side of life as well.

2. False. Some people who talk about suicide do kill themselves. Warning signals of possible suicide attempts include talk of suicide, the desire not to exist anymore, and despair.

3. False. Asian/Pacific Islanders had the lowest rates of suicide per 100,000 in the United States, whereas Native Americans (American Indian/Alaskan Natives) had the highest suicide rates.

4. True. Suicide rates are highest in the western and northwestern regions of the United States (see Map 1.2 on page 33). What sociological factors might help explain this trend?

5. False. Males complete suicide at a rate four times that of females. However, females attempt suicide three times more often than males.

6. False. Just the opposite is true: Over half of all suicides occur in adult men aged 25 to 65.

7. True. In the United States as in other countries, suicide rates are the highest among men over age 70. One theory of why this is true asserts that older women may have a more flexible and diverse coping style than do older men.

8. False. Children do know how to intentionally hurt or kill themselves. They may learn the means and methods from television, movies, or other people. However, the National Center for Health Statistics (the agency responsible for compiling suicide statistics) does not recognize suicides under the age of 10; they are classified as accidents, despite evidence that young children have taken their own lives.

9. False. Suicide rates are much higher among white Americans than African Americans.

10. True. Suicide is a leading cause of death among teenagers and young adults. It is the third leading cause of death among young people between 15 and 24 years of age, following accidents (unintentional injuries) and homicide.

Sources: Based on American Association of Suicidology, 2009; and National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009b.

sociology and everyday life

ANSWERS to the Sociology Quiz on Suicide

1. True. To people thinking of suicide, an acknowledgment that there is a bright side only confirms and conveys the message that they have failed; otherwise, they could see the bright side of life as well.

2. False. Some people who talk about suicide do kill themselves. Warning signals of possible suicide attempts include talk of suicide, the desire not to exist anymore, and despair.

3. False. Asian/Pacific Islanders had the lowest rates of suicide per 100,000 in the United States, whereas Native Americans (American Indian/Alaskan Natives) had the highest suicide rates.

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Sources: Based on American Association of Suicidology, 2009; and National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009b.

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.

The Development of Sociological Thinking

Throughout history, social philosophers and religious authorities have made countless observations about human behavior. However, the idea of observing how people lived, finding out what they thought, and doing so in a systematic manner that could be verified did not take hold until the nineteenth century and the social upheaval brought about by industrialization and urbanization.

Industrialization is the process by which societies are transformed from dependence on agriculture and handmade products to an emphasis on manufacturing and related industries. This process occurred first during the Industrial Revolution in Britain between 1760 and 1850, and was soon repeated throughout Western Europe. By the mid-nineteenth century, industrialization was well under way in the United States. Massive economic, technological, and social changes occurred as machine technology and the factory system shifted the economic base of these nations from agriculture to manufacturing. A new social class of
industrialists emerged in textiles, iron smelting, and related industries. Many people who had labored on the land were forced to leave their tightly knit rural communities and sacrifice well-defined social relationships to seek employment as factory workers in the emerging cities, which became the centers of industrial work.

Urbanization is the process by which an increasing proportion of a population lives in cities rather than in rural areas. Although cities existed long before the Industrial Revolution, the development of the factory system led to a rapid increase in both the number of cities and the size of their populations. People from very diverse backgrounds worked together in the same factory. At the same time, many people shifted from being producers to being consumers. For example, families living in the cities had to buy food with their wages because they could no longer grow their own crops to consume or to barter for other resources. Similarly, people had to pay rent for their lodging because they could no longer exchange their services for shelter.

These living and working conditions led to the development of new social problems: inadequate housing, crowding, unsanitary conditions, poverty, pollution, and crime. Wages were so low that entire families—including very young children—were forced to work, often under hazardous conditions and with no job security. As these conditions became more visible, a new breed of social thinkers turned its attention to trying to understand why and how society was changing.

Early Thinkers: A Concern with Social Order and Stability

At the same time that urban problems were growing worse, natural scientists had been using reason, or rational thinking, to discover the laws of physics and the movement of the planets. Social thinkers started to believe that by applying the methods developed by the natural sciences, they might discover the laws of human behavior and apply these laws to solve social problems.
Auguste Comte

The French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the term sociology from the Latin socius ("social, being with others") and the Greek logos ("study of") to describe a new science that would engage in the study of society. Even though he never actually conducted sociological research, Comte is considered by some to be the “founder of sociology.” Comte’s theory that societies contain social statics (forces for social order and stability) and social dynamics (forces for conflict and change) continues to be used, although not in these exact terms, in contemporary sociology.

Comte stressed that the methods of the natural sciences should be applied to the objective study of society. He sought to unlock the secrets of society so that intellectuals like him could become the new secular (as contrasted with religious) “high priests” of society (Nisbet, 1979). For Comte, the best policies involved order and authority. He envisioned that a new consensus would emerge on social issues and that the new science of sociology would play a significant part in the reorganization of society (Lenzer, 1998).

Comte’s philosophy became known as positivism—a belief that the world can best be understood through scientific inquiry. He believed that positivism had two dimensions: (1) methodological—the application of scientific knowledge to both physical and social phenomena—and (2) social and political—the use of such knowledge to predict the likely results of different policies so that the best one could be chosen.

Social analysts have praised Comte for his advocacy of sociology and his insights regarding linkages between the social structural elements of society (such as family, religion, and government) and social thinking in specific historical periods. However, a number of contemporary sociologists argue that Comte contributed to an overemphasis on the “natural science model” and focused on the experiences of a privileged few, to the exclusion by class, gender, race, ethnicity, and age of all others.

Harriet Martineau

Comte’s works were made more accessible for a wide variety of scholars through the efforts of the British sociologist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876). Until recently, Martineau received no recognition in the field of sociology, partly because she was a woman in a male-dominated discipline and society. Not only did she translate and condense Comte’s works, but she was also an active sociologist in her own right.
Martineau studied the social customs of Britain and the United States, analyzing the consequences of industrialization and capitalism. In *Society in America* (1862/1837), she examined religion, politics, child rearing, slavery, and immigration in the United States, paying special attention to social distinctions based on class, race, and gender. Her works explore the status of women, children, and “sufferers” (persons who are considered to be criminal, mentally ill, handicapped, poor, or alcoholic).

Martineau advocated racial and gender equality. She was also committed to creating a science of society that would be grounded in empirical observations and widely accessible to people. She argued that sociologists should be impartial in their assessment of society but that it is entirely appropriate to compare the existing state of society with the principles on which it was founded (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998). Martineau believed that a better society would emerge if women and men were treated equally, enlightened reform occurred, and cooperation existed among people in all social classes (but led by the middle class).

**Herbert Spencer** Unlike Comte, who was strongly influenced by the upheavals of the French Revolution, the British social theorist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was born in a more peaceful and optimistic period in his country’s history. Spencer’s major contribution to sociology was an evolutionary perspective on social order and social change. Evolutionary theory is “a theory to explain the mechanisms of organic/social change” (Haines, 1997: 81). According to Spencer’s Theory of General Evolution, society, like a biological organism, has various interdependent parts (such as the family, the economy, and the government) that work to ensure the stability and survival of the entire society.

Spencer believed that societies develop through a process of “struggle” (for existence) and “fitness” (for survival), which he referred to as the “survival of the fittest.” Because this phrase is often attributed to Charles Darwin, Spencer’s view of society is known as **social Darwinism**—the belief that those species of animals, including human beings, best adapted to their environment survive and prosper, whereas those poorly adapted die out. Spencer equated this process of natural selection with progress because only the “fittest” members of society would survive the competition, and the “unfit” would be filtered out of society.

Critics believe that his ideas are flawed because societies are not the same as biological systems; people are able to create and transform the environment in which they live. Moreover, the notion of the survival of the fittest can easily be used to justify class, racial–ethnic, and gender inequalities and to rationalize the lack of action to eliminate harmful practices that contribute to such inequalities.
Emile Durkheim  French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) stressed that people are the product of their social environment and that behavior cannot be understood fully in terms of individual biological and psychological traits. He believed that the limits of human potential are socially based, not biologically based.

In his work *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1964a/1895), Durkheim set forth one of his most important contributions to sociology: the idea that societies are built on social facts. Social facts are patterned ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside any one individual but that exert social control over each person. Durkheim believed that social facts must be explained by other social facts—by reference to the social structure rather than to individual attributes.

Durkheim observed that rapid social change and a more specialized division of labor produce strains in society. These strains lead to a breakdown in traditional organization, values, and authority and to a dramatic increase in anomie—a condition in which social control becomes ineffective as a result of the loss of shared values and of a sense of purpose in society. According to Durkheim, anomie is most likely to occur during a period of rapid social change. In *Suicide* (1964b/1897), he explored the relationship between anomic social conditions and suicide, a concept that remains important in the twenty-first century (see “Sociology Works!”).

Durkheim’s contributions to sociology are so significant that he has been referred to as “the crucial figure in the development of sociology as an academic discipline [and as] one of the deepest roots of the sociological imagination” (Tiryakian, 1978: 187). He is described as the founding figure of the functionalist theoretical tradition.

Although they acknowledge Durkheim’s important contributions, some critics note that his emphasis on societal stability, or the “problem of order”—how society can establish and maintain social stability and cohesiveness—obscured the subjective meaning that individuals give to social phenomena such as religion, work, and suicide. From this view, overemphasis on structure and the determining power of “society” resulted in a corresponding neglect of agency (the beliefs and actions of the actors involved) in much of Durkheim’s theorizing (Zeitlin, 1997).

Differing Views on the Status Quo: Stability Versus Change

Together with Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, Durkheim established the course of modern sociology. We will look first at Marx’s and Weber’s divergent thoughts about conflict and social change in societies and then at Georg Simmel’s microlevel analysis of society.

Karl Marx  In sharp contrast to Durkheim’s focus on the stability of society, German economist and philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) stressed that history is a continuous clash between conflicting ideas and forces. He believed that conflict—especially class conflict—is necessary in order to produce social change and a better society. For Marx, the most important changes are economic. He concluded that the capitalist economic system was responsible for the overwhelming poverty that he observed in London at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (Marx and Engels, 1967/1848).

In the Marxian framework, class conflict is the struggle between the capitalist class and the working class. The capitalist class, or bourgeoisie, comprises those who own and control the means of production—the tools, land, factories, and money for investment
that form the economic basis of a society. The working class, or proletariat, is composed of those who must sell their labor because they have no other means to earn a livelihood. From Marx’s viewpoint, the capitalist class controls and exploits the masses of struggling workers by paying less than the value of their labor. This exploitation results in workers’ alienation—a feeling of powerlessness

The bond attaching [people] to life slackens because the bond which attaches [them] to society is itself slack. —Emile Durkheim, Suicide (1964b/1897)

Although this statement described social conditions accompanying the high rates of suicide found in late-nineteenth-century France, Durkheim’s words ring true today as we look at contemporary suicide rates for cities such as Bangalore, which some refer to as “India’s Suicide City” (Guha, 2004).

At first glance, we might think that the outsourcing of jobs in the technology sector—from high-income nations such as the United States to India—would provide happiness and job satisfaction for individuals in cities such as Bangalore and New Delhi who have gained new opportunities and higher salaries in recent years as a result of outsourcing. News stories have focused on the wealth of opportunities that these outsourced jobs have brought to millions of men and women in India, most of whom are in their twenties and thirties and who now earn larger incomes than do their parents and many of their contemporaries. However, the underlying story of what is really going on in these cities stands in stark contrast:

Rapid urbanization and fast-paced changes in the economy and society are weakening social ties that have been very important to individuals. Social bonds have been weakened or dissolved as people move away from their families and their community. Life in the cities moves at a much faster pace than in the rural areas, and many individuals experience loneliness, sleep disorders, family discord, and major health risks such as heart disease and depression (Mahapatra, 2007). In the words of Ramachandra Guha (2004), a historian residing in India, Durkheim’s sociology of suicide remains highly relevant to finding new answers to this challenging problem: “The rash of suicides in city and village is a qualitatively new development in our history. We sense that tragedies are as much social as they are individual. But we know very little of what lies behind them. What we now await, in sum, is an Indian Durkheim.”

**reflect & analyze**

How does sociology help us to examine seemingly private acts such as suicide within a larger social context? Why are some people more inclined to commit suicide if they are not part of a strong social fabric?

Durkheim’s Sociology of Suicide and Twenty-First-Century India

**social facts** Emile Durkheim’s term for patterned ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside any one individual but that exert social control over each person.

**anomie** Emile Durkheim’s designation for a condition in which social control becomes ineffective as a result of the loss of shared values and of a sense of purpose in society.
and estrangement from other people and from oneself. Marx predicted that the working class would become aware of its exploitation, overthrow the capitalists, and establish a free and classless society.

Marx is regarded as one of the most profound sociological thinkers; however, his social and economic analyses have also inspired heated debates among generations of social scientists. Central to his view was the belief that society should not just be studied but should also be changed, because the status quo (the existing state of society) involved the oppression of most of the population by a small group of wealthy people. Those who believe that sociology should be value free are uncomfortable with Marx’s advocacy of what some perceive to be radical social change. Scholars who examine society through the lens of race, gender, and class believe his analysis places too much emphasis on class relations, often to the exclusion of issues regarding race/ethnicity and gender.

Max Weber  German social scientist Max Weber (pronounced VAY-ber) (1864–1920) was also concerned about the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Although he disagreed with Marx’s idea that economics is the central force in social change, Weber acknowledged that economic interests are important in shaping human action. Even so, he thought that economic systems were heavily influenced by other factors in a society.

Unlike many early analysts who believed that values could not be separated from the research process, Weber emphasized that sociology should be value free—research should be conducted in a scientific manner and should exclude the researcher’s personal values and economic interests (Turner, Beeghley, and Powers, 2002). However, Weber realized that social behavior cannot be analyzed by the objective criteria that we use to measure such things as temperature or weight. Although he recognized that sociologists cannot be totally value free, Weber stressed that they should employ verstehen (German for “understanding” or “insight”) to gain the ability to see the world as others see it. In contemporary sociology, Weber’s idea is incorporated into the concept of the sociological imagination (discussed earlier in this chapter).

Weber was also concerned that large-scale organizations (bureaucracies) were becoming increasingly oriented toward routine administration and a specialized division of labor, which he believed were destructive to human vitality and freedom. According to Weber, rational bureaucracy, rather than class struggle, is the most significant factor in determining the social relations between people in industrial societies. From this view, bureaucratic domination can be used to maintain powerful (capitalist) interests in society. As discussed in Chapter 5 (“Groups and Organizations”), Weber’s work on bureaucracy has had a far-reaching impact.

Weber made significant contributions to modern sociology by emphasizing the goal of value-free inquiry and the necessity of understanding how others see the world. He also provided important insights on the process of rationalization, bureaucracy, religion, and many other topics. In his writings, Weber was more aware of women’s issues than many of the scholars of his day. Perhaps his awareness at least partially resulted from the fact that his wife, Marianne Weber, was an important figure in the women’s movement in Germany in the early twentieth century (Roth, 1988).

Georg Simmel  At about the same time that Durkheim was developing the field of sociology in France, the German sociologist Georg Simmel (pronounced ZIM-mel) (1858–1918) was theorizing
about society as a web of patterned interactions among people. In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (1950/1902–1917), he analyzed how social interactions vary depending on the size of the social group. He concluded that interaction patterns differed between a dyad, a social group with two members, and a triad, a social group with three members. He developed formal sociology, an approach that focuses attention on the universal recurring social forms that underlie the varying content of social interaction. Simmel referred to these forms as the “geometry of social life.”

Like the other social thinkers of his day, Simmel analyzed the impact of industrialization and urbanization on people’s lives. He concluded that class conflict was becoming more pronounced in modern industrial societies. He also linked the increase in individualism, as opposed to concern for the group, to the fact that people now had many cross-cutting “social spheres”—membership in a number of organizations and voluntary associations—rather than having the singular community ties of the past.

Simmel’s contributions to sociology are significant. He wrote more than thirty books and numerous essays on diverse topics, leading some critics to state that his work is fragmentary and piecemeal. However, his thinking has influenced a wide array of sociologists, including the members of the “Chicago School” in the United States.

### The Beginnings of Sociology in the United States

From Western Europe, sociology spread in the 1890s to the United States, where it thrived as a result of the intellectual climate and the rapid rate of social change. The first departments of sociology in the United States were located at the University of Chicago and at Atlanta University, then an African American school.

### The Chicago School

The first department of sociology in the United States was established at the University of Chicago, where the faculty was instrumental in starting the American Sociological Society (now known as the American Sociological Association). Robert E. Park (1864–1944), a member of the Chicago faculty, asserted that urbanization has a disintegrating influence on social life by producing an increase in the crime rate and in racial...
and class antagonisms that contribute to the segregation and isolation of neighborhoods (Ross, 1991). George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), another member of the faculty at Chicago, founded the symbolic interaction perspective, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Jane Addams Jane Addams (1860–1935) is one of the best-known early women sociologists in the United States because she founded Hull House, one of the most famous settlement houses, in an impoverished area of Chicago. Throughout her career, she was actively engaged in sociological endeavors: She lectured at numerous colleges, was a charter member of the American Sociological Society, and published a number of articles and books. Addams was one of the authors of *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, a groundbreaking book that used a methodological technique employed by sociologists for the next forty years (Deegan, 1988). She was also awarded a Nobel Prize for her assistance to the underprivileged.

W. E. B. Du Bois and Atlanta University The second department of sociology in the United States was founded by W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) at Atlanta University. He created a laboratory of sociology, instituted a program of systematic research, founded and conducted regular sociological conferences on research, founded two journals, and established a record of valuable publications. His classic work, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1967/1899), was based on his research into Philadelphia’s African American community and stressed the strengths and weaknesses of a community wrestling with overwhelming social problems. Du Bois was one of the first scholars to note that a dual heritage creates conflict for people of color. He called this duality *double-consciousness*—the identity conflict of being both a black and an American. Du Bois pointed out that although people in this country espouse such values as democracy, freedom, and equality, they also accept racism and group discrimination. African Americans are the victims of these conflicting values and the actions that result from them (Benjamin, 1991).

**Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives**

Given the many and varied ideas and trends that influenced the development of sociology, how do contemporary sociologists view society? Some see it as basically a stable and ongoing entity; others view it in terms of many groups competing for scarce resources; still others describe it based on the everyday, routine interactions among individuals. Each of these views represents a method of examining the same phenomena. Each is based on general ideas about how social life is organized and represents an effort to link specific observations in a meaningful way. Each uses a *theory*—a set of logically interrelated statements that attempts to describe, explain,
and (occasionally) predict social events. Each theory helps interpret reality in a distinct way by providing a framework in which observations may be logically ordered. Sociologists refer to this theoretical framework as a perspective—an overall approach to or viewpoint on some subject. Three major theoretical perspectives have been predominant in U.S. sociology: the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives. Other perspectives, such as postmodernism, have emerged and gained acceptance among some social thinkers more recently. Before turning to the specifics of these perspectives, we should note that some theorists and theories do not fit neatly into any of these perspectives.

**Functionalist Perspectives**

Also known as functionalism and structural functionalism, functionalist perspectives are based on the assumption that society is a stable, orderly system. This stable system is characterized by societal consensus, whereby the majority of members share a common set of values, beliefs, and behavioral expectations. According to this perspective, a society is composed of interrelated parts, each of which serves a function and (ideally) contributes to the overall stability of the society. Societies develop social structures, or institutions, that persist because they play a part in helping society survive. These institutions include the family, education, government, religion, and the economy. If anything adverse happens to one of these institutions or parts, all other parts are affected, and the system no longer functions properly.

**Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton**

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), perhaps the most influential contemporary advocate of the functionalist perspective, stressed that all societies must provide for meeting social needs in order to survive. Parsons (1955) suggested, for example, that a division of labor (distinct, specialized functions) between husband and wife is essential for family stability and social order. The husband/father performs the instrumental tasks, which involve leadership and decision-making responsibilities in the home and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>a set of logically interrelated statements that attempts to describe, explain, and (occasionally) predict social events.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functionalist perspectives</td>
<td>the sociological approach that views society as a stable, orderly system.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
employment outside the home to support the family. The wife/mother is responsible for the expressive tasks, including housework, caring for the children, and providing emotional support for the entire family. Parsons believed that other institutions, including school, church, and government, must function to assist the family and that all institutions must work together to preserve the system over time (Parsons, 1955).

Functionalism was refined further by Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), who distinguished between manifest and latent functions of social institutions. Manifest functions are intended and/or overtly recognized by the participants in a social unit. In contrast, latent functions are unintended functions that are hidden and remain unacknowledged by participants. For example, a manifest function of education is the transmission of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next; a latent function is the establishment of social relations and networks. Merton noted that all features of a social system may not be functional at all times; dysfunctions are the undesirable consequences of any element of a society. A dysfunction of education in the United States is the perpetuation of gender, racial, and class inequalities. Such dysfunctions may threaten the capacity of a society to adapt and survive (Merton, 1968).

**Applying a Functional Perspective to Suicide** How might functionalists analyze the problem of suicide among young people? Most functionalists emphasize the importance to a society of shared moral values and strong social bonds. When rapid social change or other disruptive conditions occur, moral values may erode, and people may become more uncertain about how to act and about whether or not their life has meaning.

In sociologist Donna Gaines’s (1991) study of the suicide pact of four teenagers in Bergenfield, New Jersey, she concluded that Durkheim’s description of both fatalistic and anomic suicide could be applied to the suicides of some teenagers. In regard to fatalistic suicide, people sometimes commit suicide “because they have lost the ability to dream” (Gaines, 1991: 253). According to Gaines, the four teenagers who took their lives in Bergenfield were bound closely together in a shared predicament: They wanted to get out, but they couldn’t. As one young man noted, “They were beaten down as far as they could go” because they lacked confidence in themselves and were fearful of the world they faced. In other words, they felt trapped, and to them—without having a sense of meaningful choices—the only way out was to commit suicide (Gaines, 1991: 253). But, according to Gaines, fatalistic suicide does not completely explain the experiences of suicidal young people. Young people may also engage in anomic suicide, where the individual does not feel connected to the society. In fact, as Gaines (1991: 253) notes, “the glue that holds the person to the group isn’t strong enough; social bonds are loose, weak, or absent. To be anomic is to feel disengaged, adrift, alienated. Like you don’t fit in anywhere, there is no place for

Shopping malls are a reflection of a consumer society. A manifest function of a shopping mall is to sell goods and services to shoppers; however, a latent function may be to provide a communal area in which people can visit friends and eat. For this reason, food courts have proven to be a boon in shopping malls around the globe.
you: in your family, your school, your town—in the social order.”

**Conflict Perspectives**

According to conflict perspectives, groups in society are engaged in a continuous power struggle for control of scarce resources. Conflict may take the form of politics, litigation, negotiations, or family discussions about financial matters. Simmel, Marx, and Weber contributed significantly to this perspective by focusing on the inevitability of clashes between social groups. Today, advocates of the conflict perspective view social life as a continuous power struggle among competing social groups.

**Max Weber and C. Wright Mills** As previously discussed, Karl Marx focused on the exploitation and oppression of the proletariat (the workers) by the bourgeoisie (the owners or capitalist class). Max Weber recognized the importance of economic conditions in producing inequality and conflict in society, but he added power and prestige as other sources of inequality. Weber (1968/1922) defined power as the ability of a person within a social relationship to carry out his or her own will despite resistance from others, and prestige as a positive or negative social estimation of honor (Weber, 1968/1922).

C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), a key figure in the development of contemporary conflict theory, encouraged sociologists to get involved in social reform. Mills encouraged everyone to look beneath everyday events in order to observe the major resource and power inequalities that exist in society. He believed that the most important decisions in the United States are made largely behind the scenes by the power elite—a small clique composed of top corporate, political, and military officials. Mills's power elite theory is discussed in Chapter 13 ("Politics and the Economy in Global Perspective").

The conflict perspective is not one unified theory but rather encompasses several branches. One branch is the neo-Marxist approach, which views struggle between the classes as inevitable and as a prime source of social change. A second branch focuses on racial-ethnic inequalities and the continued exploitation of members of some racial-ethnic groups. A third branch is the feminist perspective, which focuses on gender issues.

**The Feminist Approach** A feminist theoretical approach (or "feminism") directs attention to women's experiences and the importance of gender as an element of social structure. This approach is based on the belief that “women and men are equal and should be equally valued as well as have equal rights” (Basow, 1992). According to feminist theorists, we live in a patriarchy, a system in which men...
dominate women and in which things that are considered to be “male” or “masculine” are more highly valued than those considered to be “female” or “feminine.” The feminist perspective assumes that gender is socially created, rather than determined by one’s biological inheritance, and that change is essential in order for people to achieve their human potential without limits based on gender. Some feminists argue that women’s subordination can end only after the patriarchal system becomes obsolete. However, feminism is not one single, unified approach; there are several feminist perspectives, which are discussed in Chapter 10 (“Sex and Gender”).

**Applying Conflict Perspectives to Suicide**

How might advocates of a conflict approach explain suicide among teenagers and young people?

**Social Class** Although many other factors may be present, social class pressures may affect rates of suicide among young people when they perceive that they have few educational or employment opportunities in our technologically oriented society and little hope for the future. As a result, young people from low-income or working-class family backgrounds may believe that they are among the most powerless people in society. However, class-based inequality alone cannot explain suicides among young people because teenage suicides also occur among affluent young people (Colt, 1991).

**Gender** In North America, females are more likely to attempt suicide, whereas males are more likely to actually take their own life. Despite the fact that women’s suicidal behavior has traditionally been attributed to problems in their interpersonal relationships, such as loss of a boyfriend, lover, or husband, feminist analysts believe that we must examine social structural pressures that are brought to bear on young women and how these may contribute to their behavior—for example, cultural assumptions about women and what their multiple roles should be in the family, education, and the workplace. Women also experience unequal educational and employment opportunities that may contribute to feelings of powerlessness and alienation. Recent research shows that there are persistent gender gaps in U.S. employment, politics, and other areas of social life that tend to adversely affect women more than men.

**Race** Racial subordination may be a factor in some suicides. Figure 1.2 displays U.S. suicides in terms of race and sex. This fact is most glaringly reflected in the extremely high rate of suicide among Native Americans, who constitute about 1 percent of the U.S. population. The rate of suicide among young Native American males on government-owned reservations is especially high, and almost 60 percent of Native American suicides involve firearms (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2009). Most research has focused on individualistic reasons why young Native Americans commit suicide; however, analysts using a race-and-ethnic framework focus on the effect of social inequalities and racial discrimination on suicidal behavior.

**Symbolic Interactionist Perspectives**

The conflict and functionalist perspectives have been criticized for focusing primarily on macro-level analysis. A **macrolevel analysis examines whole societies, large-scale social structures,**
and social systems instead of looking at important social dynamics in individuals’ lives. Our third perspective, symbolic interactionism, fills this void by examining people’s day-to-day interactions and their behavior in groups. Thus, symbolic interactionist approaches are based on a microlevel analysis, which focuses on small groups rather than large-scale social structures.

We can trace the origins of this perspective to the Chicago School, especially George Herbert Mead and the sociologist Herbert Blumer (1900–1986), who is credited with coining the term symbolic interactionism. According to symbolic interactionist perspectives, society is the sum of the interactions of individuals and groups. Theorists using this perspective focus on the process of interaction—defined as immediate reciprocally oriented communication between two or more people—and the part that symbols play in giving meaning to human communication. A symbol is anything that meaningfully represents something else. Examples of symbols include signs, gestures, written language, and shared values. Symbolic interaction occurs when people communicate through the use of symbols—for example, a ring to indicate a couple’s engagement. But symbolic communication occurs in a variety of forms, including facial gestures, posture, tone of voice, and other symbolic gestures (such as a handshake or a clenched fist).

Symbols are instrumental in helping people derive meanings from social interactions. In social encounters, each person’s interpretation or definition of a given situation becomes a subjective reality from that person’s viewpoint. We often assume that what we consider to be “reality” is shared by others; however, this assumption is often incorrect. Subjective reality is acquired and shared through agreed-upon symbols, especially language. If a person shouts “Fire!” in a crowded movie theater, for example, that language produces the same response (attempting to escape) in all of those who hear and understand it.
people in a group do not share the same meaning for a given symbol, however, confusion results: People who do not know the meaning of the word fire will not know what the commotion is about. How people interpret the messages they receive and the situations they encounter becomes their subjective reality and may strongly influence their behavior.

**Applying Symbolic Interactionist Perspectives to Suicide** Social analysts applying a symbolic interactionist framework to the study of suicide would focus on a microlevel analysis of the people's face-to-face interactions and the roles they played in society. In our efforts to interact with others, we define the situation according to our own subjective reality. This applies to suicide just as it does to other types of conduct.

From this point of view, a suicide attempt may be a way of moving toward other people—in the form of a cry for help and personal acceptance—rather than a move toward death (Colt, 1991). People may attempt to communicate in such desperate ways because other forms of communication have failed. For example, a thirteen-year-old Illinois girl slashed her wrists shortly before she knew her mother was expected to come into her room; she wanted to show her parents how upset and unhappy she was about their pending divorce. As the girl later said, "I didn't really want to die. I just hoped and prayed that if Mom and Dad knew how upset and unhappy I was, Dad would move back in" (qtd. in Giffin and Felsenthal, 1983: 19).

**Postmodern Perspectives**

According to postmodern perspectives, existing theories have been unsuccessful in explaining social life in contemporary societies that are characterized by postindustrialization, consumerism,
going on around them, many of them are apparently becoming concerned about their own future. Despite the ability to keep their jobs, some employees are being asked to change jobs internally, change work locations, or both. When workers have a sense that constant upheaval is going on around them, they become insecure even if they are reminded that they have job security.

When we look at current economic issues from a global perspective, particularly in light of a postmodern theoretical approach, we can see that rapid social change (as suggested by Durkheim) may be a factor in why some nations have a higher rate of suicide than others. However, we can also see that factors such as risk and the increasingly fragmented nature of contemporary society may lead to feelings of stress and ambivalence regardless of what the true nature of the situation might be. In the words of Xavier Darcos, France’s employment minister, “We are in a transforming economy. . . . For us, unemployment is the absolute failure. We prefer to have people who don’t feel totally happy at work, or to work part time, rather than people being unemployed” (qtd. in Jolly and Saltmarsh, 2009: B3).

According to the World Health Organization, France as a nation has the eighth-highest suicide rate per 100,000 people, with a rate of 26.4 per 100,000 for men and a rate of 9.2 per 100,000 for women (Jolly and Saltmarsh, 2009). Countries with higher rates of suicide than France (in order from first to seventh) are Lithuania (68.1 for men, 12.9 for women), Russia (58.1 for men, 9.8 for women), Hungary (42.3 for men, 11.2 for women), Japan (34.8 for men, 13.2 for women), Belgium (31.2 for men, 11.4 for women), South Korea (29.6 for men, 14.1 for women), and Poland (27.8 for men, 4.6 for women). The rates for men and women are listed separately so that you can see the differences based on gender. This brings us to several important questions not only about the reasons for suicide but also the pronounced gender differences in rates of suicide.

reflect & analyze
How is it that we can feel high levels of stress when we are placed in situations where everything is supposedly all right? Why do some workers in France feel as much stress when they are asked to move from one position to another as workers feel in the United States when they are laid off or fired? How might the postmodern perspective on the relationship between risk and the class structure be applied to the problem of an increasing rate of suicide in France?

Postmodern social theorists reject the theoretical perspectives we have previously discussed, as well as how those theories were created (Ritzer, 2000b).

Postmodern theories are based on the assumption that the rapid social change that occurs as societies move from modern to postmodern (or postindustrial) conditions has a harmful effect on people. One evident change is a significant decline in the influence of social institutions such as the family, religion, and education on people’s lives. Those who live in postmodern societies typically pursue individual freedom and do not want the structural constraints that are imposed by social institutions. However, the collective ties that once bound people together become weakened, placing people at higher levels of risk—“probabilities of physical harm due to given technological or other processes”—than in the past (Beck, 1992: 4). As social institutions grow weaker, people at risk come to believe that social and economic chaos looms before them and that no safety net is provided by families, peers, and the larger community. According to one theorist, there is a relationship between risk and the class structure: “Wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom” (Beck, 1992: 35). Social inequality and class differences increase as people in the lower economic tiers are exposed to increasing levels of personal risk that, in turn, produce depression, fear, and ambivalence. Problems such as these are found in nations throughout the world, as discussed in the Sociology in Global Perspective box.
In sum, postmodern theories tend to emphasize the fragmented nature of contemporary society brought about by constant change, a situation that leads to feelings of ambivalence among individuals because they are uncertain about which course of action they should take and because there is no one present to help them figure this out (Bauman, 1992). Postmodern theory enhances our study of sociology because it opens up broad new avenues of inquiry, even as it challenges other theoretical perspectives and asks pertinent questions about our current belief systems. However, postmodern theory has also been criticized for raising more questions than it attempts to answer and for being so vague and abstract that it is hard to understand and even more difficult to apply (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004).

**Applying Postmodern Perspectives to Suicide** Although most postmodern social theorists have not addressed suicide as a social issue, some sociologists believe that postmodern theory can help us understand differing rates of suicide, particularly among people in certain ethnic categories. Consider, for example, this research question: Why in recent decades has there been a significant increase in suicide rates among young African American males between the ages of fifteen and nineteen? Historically, African Americans at all income levels had lower rates of suicide than other ethnic groups in the United States—a fact that scholars attribute to higher levels of religiosity and group support that protected African Americans from suicidal behavior (Willis, Coombs, Cockerham, and Frison, 2002). However, this pattern changed over the past two decades, particularly in the category of young African American males between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, a statistical group that now has a rate of suicide comparable to that of young white males (Willis et al., 2002).

Although youths across ethnic categories share certain risk factors for suicide, such as social isolation, feelings of marginality, high rates of unemployment, and sometimes depression, young African American males appear to be at greater risk for suicide (based on postmodern theorization) because people in this statistical category are among the most likely to be at risk in other ways in a postmodern society. A major problem for some African American young men is the absence of educational and employment opportunities. This problem is combined with other issues, such as the weakening of the family structure, a breakdown in community values, the diminished importance of the African American church, and the growing influence of the media in revealing the vast inequalities that exist in the United States and in other high-income nations. These problems have been further exacerbated by a dramatic rise in the drug trade and in possession of firearms (Willis et al., 2002).

According to some sociologists, postmodern theory helps explain why there are higher rates of suicide among African American youths than in the past: The transition from a modern to a postmodern society has left them at greater risk than others due to the loss of social support systems that previously would have helped them cope with fear, depression, and suicidal tendencies. In the past, African Americans lived a community-oriented existence; today, they face an “individualistic” society that contributes to personal stress and heightened vulnerability without any place in which to turn (Willis et al., 2002).

Each of the four sociological perspectives we have examined involves different assumptions. Consequently, each leads us to ask different questions and to view the world somewhat differently. Different aspects of reality are the focus of each approach. Whereas functionalism emphasizes social cohesion and order, conflict approaches focus primarily on social tension and change. In contrast, symbolic interactionism primarily examines people’s interactions and shared meanings in everyday life. Postmodemism challenges all of the other perspectives and questions current belief systems.

The Concept Quick Review for this chapter summarizes all four of these perspectives. Throughout this book, we will be using these perspectives as lenses through which to view our social world.

**The Sociological Research Process**

*Research* is the process of systematically collecting information for the purpose of testing an existing theory or generating a new one. What is the relationship between sociological theory and research? The relationship between theory and research has
been referred to as a continuous cycle, as shown in Figure 1.3 (Wallace, 1971).

Not all sociologists conduct research in the same manner. Some researchers primarily engage in quantitative research, whereas others engage in qualitative research. With **quantitative research**, the goal is scientific objectivity, and the focus is on data that can be measured numerically. Quantitative research typically emphasizes complex statistical techniques. Most sociological studies on suicide have used quantitative research. They have compared rates of suicide with almost every conceivable variable, including age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, and even sports participation. For example, researchers in one study examined the effects of church membership, divorce, and migration on suicide rates in the United States at various times between 1933 and 1980. The study concluded that suicide rates were higher where divorce rates were higher, migration higher, and church membership lower (see Breault, 1986). (The Understanding Statistical Data Presentations box explains how to read numerical tables, how to interpret the data and draw conclusions, and how to calculate ratios and rates.)

### The Major Theoretical Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Analysis Level</th>
<th>View of Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functionalist</td>
<td>Macrolevel</td>
<td>Society is composed of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability within society. This stability is threatened by dysfunctional acts and institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Macrolevel</td>
<td>Society is characterized by social inequality; social life is a struggle for scarce resources. Social arrangements benefit some groups at the expense of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Interactionist</td>
<td>Microlevel</td>
<td>Society is the sum of the interactions of people and groups. Behavior is learned in interaction with other people; how people define a situation becomes the foundation for how they behave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernist</td>
<td>Macrolevel/Microlevel</td>
<td>Societies characterized by postindustrialization, consumerism, and global communication bring into question existing assumptions about social life and the nature of reality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1.3 THE THEORY AND RESEARCH CYCLE**

The theory and research cycle can be compared to a relay race; although all participants do not necessarily start or stop at the same point, they share a common goal—to examine all levels of social life.

Are men or women more likely to commit suicide? Are suicide rates increasing or decreasing? Such questions can be answered in numerical terms. Sociologists often use statistical tables as a concise way to present data because such tables convey a large amount of information in a relatively small space. Table 1 gives an example. To understand a table, follow these steps:


2. Check the source and other explanatory notes. In this case, the source is National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2006. Checking the source helps determine its reliability and timeliness. The first footnote indicates that the table includes only people who reside in the United States. The next footnote reflects that, due to rounding, the percentages in a column may not total 100.0%. The final two footnotes provide more information about exactly what is included in each category.

3. Read the headings for each column and each row. The main column headings in Table 1 are “Method,” “Males,” and “Females.” These last two column headings are divided into two groups: 1984 and 2005. The columns present information (usually numbers) arranged vertically. The rows present information horizontally. Here, the row headings indicate suicide methods.

4. Examine and compare the data. To examine the data, determine what units of measurement have been used. In Table 1, the figures are numerical counts (for example, the total number of reported female suicides by poisoning in 2005 was 2,632) and percentages (for example, in 2005, poisoning accounted for 39.1 percent of all female suicides reported). A percentage, or proportion, shows how many of a given item there are in every one hundred. Percentages allow us to compare groups of different sizes.

5. Draw conclusions. By looking for patterns, some conclusions can be drawn from Table 1.

a. Determining the increase or decrease. Between 1984 and 2005, reported male suicides by firearms increased from 14,504 to 14,926—an increase of 422—while female suicides by firearms decreased by 523. This represents a total increase (for males) and decrease (for females) in suicides by firearms for the two years being compared. The amount of increase or decrease can be stated as a percentage: Total male suicides by firearms were about 2.9 percent higher in 2005, calculated by dividing the total increase (422) by the earlier (lower) number. Total female suicides by firearms were about 20 percent lower in 2005, calculated by dividing the total decrease (523) by the earlier (higher) number.

b. Drawing appropriate conclusions. The number of female suicides by firearms decreased about 20 percent between 1984 and 2005; the number for poisoning increased by about 9.4 percent. We might conclude that more women preferred poisoning over firearms as a means of killing themselves in 2005 than in 1984. Does that mean fewer women had access to guns in 2005? That poisoning oneself became more acceptable? Although several possible answers to these questions exist, one thing is evident as we compare data on suicide by sex and method over time: Firearms remain the most commonly used method of suicide among males (usually in the range of 56–58 percent annually) while poisoning continues to be the most common method of suicide for females (usually in the range of 39–41 percent annually).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22,689</td>
<td>25,907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firearms</td>
<td>14,504</td>
<td>14,926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% of total)</td>
<td>(64.0)</td>
<td>(57.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poisoning</td>
<td>3,203</td>
<td>3,112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% of total)</td>
<td>(14.1)</td>
<td>(12.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffocation</td>
<td>3,478</td>
<td>5,887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% of total)</td>
<td>(15.3)</td>
<td>(22.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1,504</td>
<td>1,992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% of total)</td>
<td>(6.6)</td>
<td>(7.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excludes deaths of nonresidents of the United States.
†Due to rounding, the percentages in a column may not add up to 100.0%.
‡Includes solids, liquids, and gases.
§Includes hanging and strangulation.

With qualitative research, interpretive descriptions (words) rather than statistics (numbers) are used to analyze underlying meanings and patterns of social relationships. An example of qualitative research is a study in which the researchers systematically analyzed the contents of suicide notes to look for recurring themes (such as feelings of despair or failure) in such notes to determine if any patterns could be found that would help in understanding why people kill themselves (Leenaars, 1988).

The “Conventional” Research Model

Research models are tailored to the specific problem being investigated and the focus of the researcher. Both quantitative research and qualitative research contribute to our knowledge of society and human social interaction, and involve a series of steps as shown in Figure 1.4. We will now trace the steps in the “conventional” research model, which focuses on quantitative research. Then we will describe an alternative model that emphasizes qualitative research.

1. **Select and define the research problem.** Sometimes, a specific experience such as knowing someone who committed suicide can trigger your interest in a topic. Other times, you might select topics to fill gaps or challenge misconceptions in existing research or to test a specific theory (Babbie, 2004). Emile Durkheim selected suicide because he wanted to demonstrate the importance of
society in situations that might appear to be arbitrary acts by individuals. Suicide was a suitable topic because it was widely believed that suicide was a uniquely individualistic act. However, Durkheim emphasized that suicide rates provide better explanations for suicide than do individual acts of suicide. He reasoned that if suicide were purely an individual act, then the rate of suicide (the relative number of people who kill themselves each year) should be the same for every group regardless of culture and social structure. Moreover, Durkheim wanted to know why there were different rates of suicide—whether factors such as religion, marital status, sex, and age had an effect on social cohesion.

2. Review previous research. Before beginning the research, it is important to analyze what others have written about the topic. You should determine where gaps exist and note mistakes to avoid. When Durkheim began his study, very little sociological literature existed to review; however, he studied the works of several moral philosophers, including Henry Morselli (1975/1881).

3. Formulate the hypothesis (if applicable). You may formulate a hypothesis—a statement of the expected relationship between two or more variables. A variable is any concept with measurable traits or characteristics that can change or vary from one person, time, situation, or society to another. The most fundamental relationship in a hypothesis is between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables (see Figure 1.5). The independent variable is presumed to be the cause of the relationship; the dependent variable is assumed to be caused by the independent variable(s) (Babbie, 2004). Durkheim's

![Figure 1.5 Hypothesized Relationships Between Variables](image)

- **A causal relationship**
  - Depression → Suicide rate
  - “Depression causes suicide.”

- **An inverse causal relationship (Durkheim)**
  - Social integration → Suicide rate
  - The lack of social integration causes suicide.”

- **A multiple-cause explanation**
  - Rate of social change → Poverty → Religion → Suicide rate
  - “Many factors interact to cause suicide.”
hypothesis stated that the rate of suicide varies inversely with the degree of social integration. In other words, a low degree of social integration (the independent variable) may “cause” or “be related to” a high rate of suicide (the dependent variable).

Not all social research uses hypotheses. If you plan to conduct an explanatory study (showing a cause-and-effect relationship), you will likely want to formulate one or more hypotheses to test theories. If you plan to conduct a descriptive study, however, you will be less likely to do so because you may desire only to describe social reality or provide facts.

4. Develop the research design. You must determine the unit of analysis to be used in the study. A unit of analysis is what or whom is being studied (Babbie, 2004). In social science research, individuals, social groups (such as families, cities, or geographic regions), organizations (such as clubs, labor unions, or political parties), and social artifacts (such as books, paintings, or weddings) may be units of analysis. Durkheim's unit of analysis was social groups, not individuals, because he believed that the study of individual cases of suicide would not explain the rates of suicide in various European countries.

5. Collect and analyze the data. You must decide what population will be observed or questioned and then carefully select a sample. A sample is the people who are selected from the population to be studied; the sample should accurately represent the larger population. A representative sample is a selection from a larger population that has the essential characteristics of the total population. For example, if you interviewed five students selected haphazardly from your sociology class, they would not be representative of your school's total student body. By contrast, if you selected five students from the total student body by a random sample, they would be closer to being representative (although a random sample of five students would be too small to yield much useful data).

Validity and reliability may be problems in research. Validity is the extent to which a study or research instrument accurately measures what it is supposed to measure. A recurring issue in studies that analyze the relationship between religious beliefs and suicide is whether "church membership" is an accurate indicator of a person's religious beliefs. In fact, one person may be very religious yet not belong to a specific church, whereas another person may be a member of a church yet not hold very deep religious beliefs. Reliability is the extent to which a study or research instrument yields consistent results when applied to different individuals at one time or to the same individuals over time. Sociologists have found that different interviewers get different answers from the people being interviewed. For example, how might interviews with college students who have contemplated suicide be influenced by the interviewers themselves?

Once you have collected your data, the data must be analyzed. Analysis is the process through which data are organized so that comparisons can be made and conclusions drawn. Sociologists use many techniques to analyze data. After collecting data from vital statistics for approximately 26,000 suicides, Durkheim analyzed his data according to four distinctive categories of suicide. Egoistic suicide occurs among people who are isolated from any social group. By contrast, altruistic suicide occurs among individuals who are excessively integrated into society (for example,
military leaders who kill themselves after defeat in battle). **Anomic suicide** results from a lack of social regulation, whereas **fatalistic suicide** results from excessive regulation and oppressive discipline (for example, slaves).

6. Draw conclusions and report the findings. After analyzing the data, your first step in drawing conclusions is to return to your hypothesis or research objective to clarify how the data relate both to the hypothesis and to the larger issues being addressed. At this stage, you note the limitations of the study, such as problems with the sample, the influence of variables over which you had no control, or variables that your study was unable to measure.

Reporting the findings is the final stage. The report generally includes a review of each step taken in the research process in order to make the study available for replication—the repetition of the investigation in substantially the same way that it was originally conducted. Social scientists generally present their findings in papers at professional meetings and publish them in technical journals and books. In reporting his findings in *Suicide* (1964b/1897), Durkheim concluded that the suicide rate of a group is a social fact that cannot be explained in terms of the personality traits of individuals. Instead, his findings suggested that social conditions in a society are a more significant influence in determining rates of suicide.

We have traced the steps in the “conventional” research process (based on deduction and quantitative research). But what steps might be taken in an alternative approach based on induction and qualitative research?

**A Qualitative Research Model**

Although the same underlying logic is involved in both quantitative and qualitative sociological research, the **styles** of these two models are very different (King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994). As previously stated, qualitative research is more likely to be used when the research question does not easily lend itself to numbers and statistical methods. As compared to a quantitative model, a qualitative approach often involves a different type of research question and a smaller number of cases.

How might qualitative research be used to study suicidal behavior? In studying different rates of suicide among women and men, for example, the social psychologist Silvia Canetto (1992) questioned whether existing theories and quantitative research provided an adequate explanation for gender differences in suicidal behavior and decided that she would explore alternate explanations. Analyzing previous research, Canetto learned that most studies linked suicidal behavior in women to problems in their personal relationships, particularly with men. By contrast, most studies of men’s suicides focused on their performance and found that men are more likely to be suicidal when their self-esteem and independence are threatened. According to Canetto’s analysis, gender differences in suicidal behavior are more closely associated with beliefs about and cultural expectations for men and women rather than purely interpersonal crises.

As in Canetto’s study, researchers using a qualitative approach may engage in problem formulation to clarify the research question and to formulate questions of concern and interest to people participating in the research (Reinharz, 1992). To create a research design for Canetto’s study, we might start with the proposition that studies have attributed women’s and men’s suicidal behavior to the wrong causes. Next, we might decide to interview individuals who have attempted suicide. Our research design might develop a collaborative approach in which the participants are brought into the research-design process, not just treated as passive objects to be studied (Reinharz, 1992).

Although Canetto did not gather data in her study, she reevaluated existing research, concluding from existing data that alternate explanations of women’s and men’s suicidal behavior are justified.

In a qualitative approach, the next step is collecting and analyzing data to assess the validity of the starting proposition. Data gathering is the foundation of the research. Researchers pursuing a qualitative approach tend to gather data in natural settings, such as where the person lives or works, rather than in a laboratory or other research setting. Data collection and analysis frequently occur concurrently, and the analysis draws heavily on the language of the persons studied, not the researcher.
Research Methods

How do sociologists know which research method to use? Are some approaches best for a particular problem? *Research methods are specific strategies or techniques for systematically conducting research.* We will look at four of these methods: survey research, analysis of existing statistical data, field research, and experiments.

Survey Research

*A survey is a poll in which the researcher gathers facts or attempts to determine the relationships among facts.* Surveys are the most widely used research method in the social sciences because they make it possible to study things that are not directly observable—such as people’s attitudes and beliefs—and to describe a population too large to observe directly (Babbie, 2004). Researchers frequently select a representative sample (a small group of respondents) from a larger population (the total group of people) to answer questions about their attitudes, opinions, or behavior. *Respondents* are people who provide data for analysis through interviews or questionnaires. The Gallup and Harris polls are among the most widely known large-scale surveys; however, government agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau conduct a variety of surveys as well.

Unlike many polls that use various methods of gaining a representative sample of the larger population, the Census Bureau attempts to gain information from all persons in the United States. The decennial census occurs every 10 years, in the years ending in “0.” The purpose of this census is to count the population and housing units of the entire United States. The population count determines how seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are apportioned; however, census figures are also used in formulating public policy and in planning and decision making in the private sector. The Census Bureau attempts to survey the entire U.S. population by using two forms—a “short form” of questions asked of all respondents, and a “long form” that contains additional questions asked of a *representative sample* of about one in six respondents. Statistics from the Census Bureau provide information that sociologists use in their research. An example is shown in the Census Profiles feature: “How People in the United States Self-Identify as to Race.” Note that because of recent changes in the methods used to collect data by the Census Bureau, information on race from the 2000 census is not directly comparable with data from earlier censuses.

Survey data are collected by using questionnaires and interviews. A *questionnaire* is a printed research instrument containing a series of items to which subjects respond. Items are often in the form of questions that require respondents to answer yes or no, or to circle a number or letter that indicates how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement.

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▲ Conducting surveys and polls is an important means of gathering data from respondents. Some surveys take place on street corners; increasingly, however, such surveys are done by telephone, Internet, or other means.
of statements with which the respondent is asked to “agree” or “disagree.” Questionnaires may be admin-istered by interviewers in face-to-face encounters or by telephone, but the most commonly used technique is the self-administered questionnaire, which is either mailed to the respondent’s home or administered to groups of respondents gathered at the same place at the same time. For example, the sociologist Kevin E. Early (1992) used survey data collected through questionnaires to test his hypothesis that suicide rates are lower among African Americans than among white Americans due to the influence of the black church. Data from questionnaires filled out by members of six African American churches in Florida supported Early’s hypothesis that the church buffers some African Americans against harsh social forces—such as racism—that might otherwise lead to suicide.

Survey data may also be collected by interviews. An interview is a data-collection encounter in which an interviewer asks the respondent questions and records the answers. Survey research often uses structured interviews, in which the interviewer asks questions from a standardized questionnaire. Structured interviews tend to produce uniform or replicable data that can be elicited time after time by different interviews. For example, in addition to surveying congregation members, Early (1992) conducted interviews with pastors of African American churches to determine the pastors’ opinions about the extent to which the African American church reinforces values and beliefs that discourage suicide. Survey research is useful in describing the characteristics of a large population without having to interview each person in that population. In recent

### How People in the United States
Self-Identify as to Race

Beginning with Census 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau has made it possible for people responding to census questions regarding their race to mark more than one racial category. Although the vast majority of respondents select only one category (see below), the Census Bureau reports that in 2003 approximately 4.3 million people (1.48 percent of the population) in the United States self-identified as being of more than one race. As a result, if you look at the figures as set forth, they total more than 100 percent of the total population. How can this be? Simply stated, some individuals are counted at least twice, based on the number of racial categories they listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White alone or in combination with one or more other races</td>
<td>81.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American alone or in combination with one or more other races</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American alone or in combination with one or more other races</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American alone or in combination with one or more other races</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander alone or in combination with one or more other races</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

years, computer technology has enhanced researchers’ ability to do multivariate analysis—research involving more than two independent variables. For example, to assess the influence of religion on suicidal behavior among African Americans, a researcher might look at the effects of age, sex, income level, and other variables all at once to determine which of these independent variables influences suicide the most or least and how influential each variable is relative to the others. However, a weakness of survey research is the use of standardized questions; this approach tends to force respondents into categories in which they may or may not belong. Moreover, survey research relies on self-reported information, and some people may be less than truthful, particularly on emotionally charged issues such as suicide.

Secondary Analysis of Existing Data

In secondary analysis, researchers use existing material and analyze data that were originally collected by others. Existing data sources include public records, official reports of organizations or government agencies, and raw data collected by other researchers. For example, Durkheim used vital statistics (death records) that were originally collected for other purposes to examine the relationship among variables such as age, marital status, and the circumstances surrounding the person’s suicide. Today, many researchers studying suicide use data compiled by the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. For example, look at ▶ Map 1.2, “National Suicide Statistics at a Glance,” based on data compiled by the

Interview a research method using a data-collection encounter in which an interviewer asks the respondent questions and records the answers.

Secondary analysis a research method in which researchers use existing material and analyze data that were originally collected by others.
CDC, and try to develop several plausible sociological explanations for why suicide rates are the highest in the western and northwestern regions of the United States. Also note the patterns of high suicide rates among some counties in the central Midwest, the South, and Central Florida. Can you provide an explanation of why rates might be higher in these areas?

Secondary analysis also includes *content analysis*—the systematic examination of cultural artifacts or various forms of communication to extract thematic data and draw conclusions about social life. Among the materials studied are written records (such as books, diaries, poems, and graffiti), narratives and visual texts (such as movies, television shows, advertisements, and greeting cards), and material culture (such as music, art, and even garbage). In content analysis, researchers look for regular patterns, such as the frequency of suicide as a topic on television talk shows.

One strength of secondary analysis is that data are readily available and inexpensive. Another is that because the researcher often does not collect the data personally, the chances of bias may be reduced. In addition, the use of existing sources makes it possible to analyze longitudinal data (things that take place over a period of time or at several different points in time) to provide a historical context within which to locate original research. However, secondary analysis has inherent problems. For one thing, the researcher does not always know if the data are incomplete, unauthentic, or inaccurate.

**Field Research**

*Field research* is the study of social life in its natural setting: observing and interviewing people where they live, work, and play. Some kinds of behavior can be best studied by “being there”; a fuller understanding can be developed through observations, face-to-face discussions, and participation in events. Researchers use these methods to generate *qualitative* data: observations that are best described verbally rather than numerically.

Sociologists who are interested in observing social interaction as it occurs may use *participant observation*—the process of collecting systematic observations while being part of the activities of the group that the researcher is studying. Participant observation generates more “inside” information than simply asking questions or observing from the outside. For example, to learn more about how coroners make a ruling of “suicide” in connection with a death and to analyze what (if any) effect such a ruling has on the accuracy of “official” suicide statistics, the sociologist Steve Taylor (1982) engaged in participant observation at a coroner’s office over a six-month period. As he followed a number of cases from the initial report of death through the various stages of investigation, Taylor learned that it was important to “be around” so that he could listen to discussions and ask the coroners questions because intuition and guesswork play a large part in some decisions to rule a death as a suicide.

Another approach to field research is the *ethnography*—a detailed study of the life and activities of a group of people by researchers who may live with that group over a period of years (Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg, 1991). Unlike participant observation, ethnographic studies usually take place over a longer period of time. For example, the sociologist Elijah Anderson (1990) conducted a study in two areas of a major city—one African American and low-income, the other racially mixed but becoming increasingly middle- to upper-income and white. As Anderson spent numerous hours on the streets, talking and listening to the people, he was able to document changes in residents’ everyday lives brought about by increased drug abuse, loss of jobs, decreases in city services despite increases in taxes, and the eventual exodus of middle-income people from the central city.

**Experiments**

An *experiment* is a carefully designed situation in which the researcher studies the impact of certain variables on subjects’ attitudes or behavior. Experiments are designed to create “real-life” situations, ideally under controlled circumstances, in which the influence of different variables can be modified and measured. Conventional experiments require that subjects be divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The *experimental group* contains the subjects who are exposed to an independent variable (the experimental
condition) to study its effect on them. The control group contains the subjects who are not exposed to the independent variable. For example, the sociologist Arturo Biblarz and colleagues (1991) examined the effects of media violence and depictions of suicide on attitudes toward suicide by showing one group of subjects (an experimental group) a film about suicide, while a second (another experimental group) saw a film about violence, and a third (the control group) saw a film containing neither suicide nor violence. The research found some evidence that people exposed to suicidal acts or violence in the media may be more likely to demonstrate an emotional state favorable to suicidal behavior, particularly if they are already “at risk” for suicide.

Researchers may use experiments when they want to demonstrate that a cause-and-effect relationship exists between variables. In order to show that a change in one variable causes a change in another, three conditions must be satisfied: (1) a correlation between the two variables must be shown to exist (correlation exists when two variables are associated more frequently than could be expected by
chance), (2) the independent variable must have occurred prior to the dependent variable, and (3) any change in the dependent variable must not have been due to an extraneous variable—one outside the stated hypothesis.

The major advantage of an experiment is the researcher’s control over the environment and the ability to isolate the experimental variable. Because many experiments require relatively little time and money and can be conducted with limited numbers of subjects, it is possible for researchers to replicate an experiment several times by using different groups of subjects (Babbie, 2004). Perhaps the greatest limitation of experiments is that they are artificial: Social processes that are set up by researchers or that take place in a laboratory setting are often not the same as real-life occurrences.

### Ethical Issues in Sociological Research

The study of people (“human subjects”) raises vital questions about ethical concerns in sociological research. Researchers are required to obtain written “informed consent” statements from the persons they study—but what constitutes “informed consent”? And how do researchers protect the identity and confidentiality of their sources?

The American Sociological Association (ASA) Code of Ethics (1997) sets forth certain basic standards that sociologists must follow in conducting research. Among these standards are the following:

1. Researchers must endeavor to maintain objectivity and integrity in their research by disclosing their research findings in full and including all possible interpretations of the data (even when these interpretations do not support their own viewpoints).
2. Researchers must safeguard the participants’ right to privacy and dignity while protecting them from harm.
3. Researchers must protect confidential information provided by participants, even when this information is not considered to be “privileged” (legally protected, as is the case between doctor and patient and between attorney and client) and legal pressure is applied to reveal this information.
4. Researchers must acknowledge research collaboration and assistance they receive from others and disclose all sources of financial support.

Sociologists are obligated to adhere to this code and to protect research participants; however, many ethical issues arise in conducting research. For example, the sociologist William Zellner (1978) wanted to look at fatal single-occupant automobile accidents to determine if some drivers were actually committing suicide. To examine this issue further, he sought to interview the family, friends, and acquaintances of persons killed in single-car crashes to determine if the deaths were possibly intentional. To recruit respondents, Zellner told them that he hoped the research would reduce the number of automobile accidents in the future. He did not mention that he suspected “autocide” might have occurred in the case of their friend or loved one. From his data, Zellner concluded that at least 12 percent of the fatal single-occupant crashes were suicides—and that these crashes sometimes also killed or critically injured other people as well. However, Zellner’s research raised important research questions: Was his research unethical? Did he misrepresent the reasons for his study?

In this chapter, we have looked at how theory and research work together to provide us with insights on human behavior. Theory and research are the “lifeblood” of sociology. Theory provides the framework
Chad felt that he knew Frank quite well. After all, they had been roommates for two years at State U. As a result, Chad was taken aback when Frank became very withdrawn, sleeping most of the day and mumbling about how unhappy he was. One evening, Chad began to wonder whether he needed to do something because Frank had begun to talk about “ending it all” and saying things like “The world will be better off without me.” If you were in Chad’s place, would you know the warning signs that you should look for? Do you know what you might do to help someone like Frank?

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to funding research, education, and treatment programs for depression and suicide prevention, suggests that each of us should be aware of these warning signs of suicide:

- **Talking about death or suicide.** Be alert to such statements as “Everyone would be better off without me.” Sometimes, individuals who are thinking about suicide speak as if they are saying goodbye.
- **Making plans.** The person may do such things as giving away valuable items, paying off debts, and otherwise “putting things in order.”
- **Showing signs of depression.** Although most depressed people are not suicidal, most suicidal people are depressed. Serious depression tends to be expressed as a loss of pleasure or withdrawal from activities that a person has previously enjoyed. It is especially important to note whether five of the following symptoms are present almost every day for several weeks: change in appetite or weight, change in sleeping patterns, speaking or moving with unusual speed or slowness, loss of interest in usual activities, decrease in sexual drive, fatigue, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, and indecisiveness or inability to concentrate.

### Responding to a Cry for Help

The possibility of suicide must be taken seriously: Most people who commit suicide give some warning to family members or friends. Instead of attempting to argue the person out of suicide or saying “You have so much to live for,” let the person know that you care and understand, and that his or her problems can be solved. Urge the person to see a school counselor, a physician, or a mental health professional immediately. If you think the person is in imminent danger of committing suicide, you should take the person to an emergency room or a walk-in clinic at a psychiatric hospital. It is best to remain with the person until help is available.

For more information about suicide prevention, contact the following organizations:

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ([www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)), 120 Wall Street, 22nd Floor, New York, NY 10005. (888) 333-2377. AFSP is a leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to understanding and preventing suicide through research and education.
- Suicide Awareness Voices of Education ([www.save.org](http://www.save.org)) is a resource index with links to other valuable resources, such as “Questions Most Frequently Asked on Suicide,” “Symptoms of Depression and Danger Signs of Suicide,” and “What to Do If Someone You Love Is Suicidal.”
- Befrienders Worldwide ([www.befrienders.org](http://www.befrienders.org)) is a website providing information for anyone feeling depressed or suicidal or who is worried about a friend or relative who feels that way. It includes a directory of suicide and crisis helplines.

for analysis; research provides opportunities for us to use our sociological imagination to generate new knowledge. Our challenge today is to find new ways of integrating knowledge and action and to include all people in the theory and research process in order to help fill the gaps in our existing knowledge about social life and how it is shaped by gender, race, class, age, and the broader social and cultural context in which everyday life occurs (Cancian, 1992). Each of us can and should find new ways to integrate knowledge and action into our daily lives (see the You Can Make a Difference box).
chapter review

● **What is sociology, and how can it help us understand ourselves and others?**
Sociology is the systematic study of human society and social interaction. We study sociology to understand how human behavior is shaped by group life and, in turn, how group life is affected by individuals. Our culture tends to emphasize individualism, and sociology pushes us to consider more complex connections between our personal lives and the larger world.

● **What is the sociological imagination?**
According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination helps us understand how seemingly personal troubles, such as suicide, are actually related to larger social forces. It is the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society.

● **What are the major contributions of early sociologists such as Durkheim, Marx, and Weber?**
Durkheim argued that societies are built on social facts, that rapid social change produces strains in society, and that the loss of shared values and purpose can lead to a condition of anomie. Marx stressed that within society there is a continuous clash between the owners of the means of production and the workers, who have no choice but to sell their labor to others. According to Weber, sociology should be value free and people should become more aware of the role that bureaucracies play in daily life.

● **How did Simmel's perspective differ from that of other early sociologists?**
Whereas other sociologists primarily focused on society as a whole, Simmel explored small social groups and argued that society is best seen as a web of patterned interactions among people.

● **What are the major contemporary sociological perspectives?**
Functionalist perspectives assume that society is a stable, orderly system characterized by societal consensus. Conflict perspectives argue that society is a continuous power struggle among competing groups, often based on class, race, ethnicity, or gender. Symbolic interactionist perspectives focus on how people make sense of their everyday social interactions. Postmodern theorists believe that entirely new ways of examining social life are needed and that it is time to move beyond functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist approaches.

● **How does quantitative research differ from qualitative research?**
Quantitative research focuses on data that can be measured numerically (comparing rates of suicide, for example). Qualitative research focuses on interpretive description (words) rather than statistics to analyze underlying meanings and patterns of social relationships.

● **What are the key steps in the conventional research process?**
A conventional research process based on deduction and the quantitative approach has these key steps: (1) selecting and defining the research problem; (2) reviewing previous research; (3) formulating the hypothesis, which involves constructing variables; (4) developing the research design; (5) collecting and analyzing the data; and (6) drawing conclusions and reporting the findings.

● **What steps are often taken by researchers using the qualitative approach?**
A researcher taking the qualitative approach might (1) formulate the problem to be studied instead of creating a hypothesis, (2) collect and analyze the data, and (3) report the results.

● **What are the major types of research methods?**
The main types of research methods are surveys, secondary analysis, field research, and experiments. Surveys are polls used to gather facts about people's attitudes, opinions, or behaviors; a representative sample of respondents provides data through questionnaires or interviews. In secondary analysis, researchers analyze existing data, such as a government census, or cultural artifacts, such as a diary. In field research, sociologists study social life in its natural setting through participant observation, interviews, and ethnography. Through experiments, researchers study the impact of certain variables on their subjects.
key terms

anomie 12  
conflict perspectives 19  
content analysis 34  
control group 35  
correlation 35  
dependent variable 28  
ethnography 34  
experiment 34  
experimental group 34  
functionalist perspectives 17  
high-income countries 6  
hypothesis 28  
independent variable 28  
industrialization 8  
interview 32  
latent functions 18  
low-income countries 7  
macrolevel analysis 20  
manifest functions 18  
microlevel analysis 21  
middle-income countries 6  
participant observation 34  
positivism 10  
postmodern perspectives 22  
qualitative research 27  
quantitative research 25  
reliability 29  
research methods 31  
secondary analysis 33  
social Darwinism 11  
social facts 12  
society 4  
sociological imagination 5  
sociology 4  
survey 31  
symbolic interactionist perspectives 21  
theory 16  
urbanization 9  
validity 29  
variable 28

questions for critical thinking

1. What does C. Wright Mills mean when he says that the sociological imagination helps us “to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society”? (Mills, 1959b: 6).

2. As a sociologist, how would you remain objective yet still see the world as others see it? Would you make subjective decisions when trying to understand the perspectives of others?

3. Early social thinkers were concerned about stability in times of rapid change. In our more global world, is stability still a primary goal? Or is constant conflict important for the well-being of all humans? Use the conflict and functionalist perspectives to bolster your analysis.

turning to video

Watch the CBS video Census 2010 (running time 2:25), available through CengageBrain.com. This video reports the purpose of the census and the efforts to count everyone. (See page xiv for a list of Census Profiles included in this text.) As you watch the video, think about the saying “Stand up and be counted,” and consider the ways in which your community may be affected by the results of the census. After you’ve watched the video, consider these questions: Were you counted in the 2010 Census? Why were you or weren’t you?

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