

Sociology

Global and Southern African Perspectives

First Edition

J.J. Macionis

Academic Editor

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Pearson South Africa (Pty) Ltd
4th floor, Auto Atlantic Building, Corner of Hertzog Boulevard and Heerengracht,
Cape Town, 8001

Offices in Johannesburg, Durban, East London, Polokwane, Bloemfontein,
Rustenburg and Mbombela.

website: <http://za.pearson.com>

Authorised adaptation from the US edition, entitled *Sociology*, 17th edition,
ISBN: 9780134642796 by John J. Macionis published by Pearson Education, Inc,
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First published by Pearson South Africa (Pty) Ltd in 2021

ISBN 978-1-485-70918-3 (print)

ISBN 978-1-485-71544-3 (epdf)

Publisher: Silvia Raninger
Managing editor: Ulla Schöler
Editor: Louise Rapley
Proofreader: Kim van Besouw
Indexer: Derika van Biljon
Maps: James Whitelaw
Book design: Pearson Media Hub
Cover design: Pearson Media Hub
Cover artwork: rawpixel/123rf.com
Typesetting: Jenny Wheeldon
Printed by xxxx printers, [city]

Acknowledgements:

The publisher would like to thank the following for permission to use their images:
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Preface

Almost all the initial drafts of the chapters for this first Southern African edition of Macionis's *Sociology* had been submitted for review and editing by the end of February 2020. Little did we know at the time that these processes would take much longer than we had anticipated. Just a short month later, our society, like that of every other, faced a crisis most people had never encountered before, and it compelled the authors to provide additional analyses in every chapter to reflect on a rapidly and profoundly changed world. In response to the global coronavirus pandemic, South Africa was placed under hard lockdown from midnight on 26 March 2020, entailing severe restrictions on the movement of people and only essential services being permitted to continue operating. At the outset, there appeared to be consensus that this was an appropriate strategy to curtail the spread of the virus and to save people's lives. However, as lockdown persisted and its negative consequences – including business closures, increasing unemployment, worsening poverty and hunger, and rising incidents of gender-based and other forms of violence – became more apparent, so that early consensus dissipated and was replaced with much debate and disagreement about the best way forward. At its core, the pandemic highlighted already existing divisions and points of contention in our society.

Consensus seemed elusive, and continues to be, many months further into the pandemic and through various levels of lockdown. Many of us feel angry, afraid and overwhelmed.

But not all is doom and gloom. Even as we read about, and experience for ourselves, the poverty, inequality, crime and violence that seem to pervade our society, we are also ourselves involved in and presented with stories of joy, hope and resilience. How do we explain the fact that a song called *Jerusalem* from a South African musical collaboration took the world by storm during the pandemic and gave rise to an international dance challenge? What about the civil society organisations that rallied to collect and deliver much-needed foodstuffs and other essentials to communities struggling to survive? And the numerous examples of ordinary people doing what they can, however seemingly small and insignificant, to help those around them?

In such a situation, where the worst and the best of humanity are there for us to see, what do we do? To answer this question, we might seek inspiration and guidance from our parents, teachers, religious leaders, politicians and role models in sport, business and entertainment. We could also, as this book will show, turn to the wisdom offered more than sixty years ago by the sociologist C. Wright Mills. When we feel our lives spinning out of control, when we are caught up in changes and challenges that threaten to overwhelm us, Mills suggested that we recognise that our personal problems as well as our successes and achievements are rooted in social forces that are bigger than we are. By directing our attention to larger social patterns – in short, by making use of the sociological imagination – we gain a deeper understanding of what is really going on and why. Using the sociological perspective, we draw insights and also gain power because we now recognise both the source of our distress and the source of our happiness. Focusing on how society operates, we are able to join together with others to change society for the better, to reinforce the things that we do well, and in the process, transform ourselves and others.

For hundreds of years (exactly how many is a point of debate, and it depends on when you think sociology first began), sociologists have been working to better understand how society works. As sociologists, we do not arrogantly imagine that we have all the answers, but we are confident that we have learned quite a lot that we can share with others.

To our students, we offer an introduction to the fascinating and very practical study of the social world. Our invitation to you is to learn from what we have learned and to consider appropriate paths of action. After all, as we come to know our world, we have the responsibility to do all we can to improve it.

Macionis's *Sociology*, seventeenth edition, on which this first edition of *Sociology: Global and Southern African Perspectives* is based, provides you with a comprehensive introduction to the discipline and its distinctive way of looking at the social world. The book takes the context in which it emerges seriously, so that classical sociological theories as well as decolonial theories with a focus on the Global South and southern African applications are discussed. In so doing, theories that are relevant for teaching and learning in South African higher education institutions and beyond are underlined to provide a balanced and comprehensive approach to sociology in this particular context. You will therefore find this book to be informative, engaging and relevant.

Before you have finished the first chapter, you will discover that sociology is both enlightening and useful, and it is also a great deal of fun. Sociology is a field of study that can change the way in which you think, feel and act, and open the door to many new opportunities. What could be more exciting than that?

Features of this book

Sociology: Global and Southern African Perspectives includes many rich features that expand the key themes of the discipline. These elements include the following:

- **Learning objectives.** Each major section of every chapter has a purpose, which is stated simply and clearly in the form of a learning objective. All the learning objectives are listed on the first page of each chapter; they guide students through their reading of the chapter. These learning objectives also involve a range of cognitive abilities. Some sections of the narrative focus on more basic cognitive skills – such as remembering the definitions of key concepts and understanding ideas to the point of being able to explain them in one's own words – while others ask students to compare and contrast theories, and apply them to specific topics.
- **'Power of society' features.** Each chapter begins with a 'Power of society' feature that provides evidence of how society influences our major life decisions, views and experiences. This allows students to see that their cultural common sense, which places particular emphasis on 'personal choice' as the key determining factor in how people's lives turn out, is only a part of the story, and that larger social trends are also at work. These figures have been specifically created for the southern African edition and focus on South African themes.

- **Chapter overviews.** Each chapter overview discusses an important issue in South Africa with which most students will be familiar. This helps students to link their own knowledge, understanding and experience of society to the main topics to be covered in the chapter, and helps them to see the relevance of sociological concepts and theories to the real world of the groups, communities and institutions to which they belong.
- **Margin definitions.** Words and terms are highlighted in the text and explained in the margins where they first appear. These definitions provide a useful learning tool for students while they engage with the text. They are also all listed together in the glossary at the end of the book.
- **‘Diversity snapshot’ and ‘Thinking about diversity’ features.** Graphs and figures highlight interesting snapshots of diversity issues in South Africa, Africa and the world. ‘Thinking about diversity’ articles delve deeply into issues such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality in South African society, and allow students to see how people’s experiences of society differ markedly along these lines.
- **‘Global snapshot’ and ‘Regional snapshot’ features.** These features provide data about societal issues from within the southern African region and other parts of the world to highlight the conditions under which people act and live in specific countries and continents. Important differences and similarities are demonstrated, encouraging students to think about and discuss their own country’s society and way of life, and how these compare with people all around the globe.
- **‘Seeing ourselves’ features.** These maps present data from the nine provinces in South Africa, showing that regional differences can have an important impact on people’s ways of life and their capacity for agency as well as on the opportunities they have to access various social rewards such as employment, housing, healthcare, schooling and transportation.
- **‘Window on the world’ features.** These maps and the data presented on them allow students to understand how different nations vary with respect to a range of social indicators, including fertility rates, access to the Internet, literacy levels, religious adherence and legality of same-sex marriage. In these features, inequalities between people in poor and rich nations are often highlighted, and students are encouraged to discuss the implications of these differences and to consider how South Africa fits into this global picture.
- **‘Controversy and debate’ features.** As its name suggests, the articles in this feature discuss both current and longstanding social issues and themes that have been, and often continue to be, the source of much disagreement among both scholars and ordinary people. These features encourage students to understand what the debate is about and what evidence there is for the various positions in the debate, and then to consider where they themselves stand in the debate.
- **Summary tables.** The summary tables that appear in all the chapters identify the key questions, concepts and arguments for each of the theories discussed in the chapter. In the southern African edition, decolonial theory has been included for most of the chapters to add to the value and completeness of a comprehensive introduction to sociology that takes the views and experiences of people from the Global South seriously.
- **‘Seeing sociology in everyday life’ and ‘Seeing sociology in your everyday life’ features.** Every chapter ends with a photograph feature on a current social issue, and then asks students to discuss specific questions that arise from the social issue. This is followed by a set of questions that relate to the main theme of the chapter and specifically tap into students’ own lives and experiences. These features show the ‘everyday life’ relevance of sociology by explaining how the material in the chapter can empower students in their personal and professional lives, while adding to the strong application focus of the book.
- **Chapter summaries.** Each chapter ends with a succinct summary to assist students in revising what they have learned in the chapter. Discussion and review questions reinforce the material learned.

Features of the lecturer support material

- **Testbank.** The testbank is written by the original author, John Macionis, as well as the South African authors, and reflects the material in the text. The file contains items for each chapter in multiple-choice, true/false and essay formats. The correct answer is provided for the multiple-choice and true/false questions, while guidance is provided for drafting a well-written answer to the essay questions. The level of cognitive reasoning that the question requires of the student according to Bloom’s taxonomy is identified. In addition, the learning objective that the question tests and the difficulty level of the question are indicated.
- **PowerPoint slides.** The PowerPoint slides support varied teaching styles while making it easy to incorporate the slides in class. They were specifically developed for the southern African edition, and provide a valuable teaching tool as well as a visual summary of every chapter in the book. They feature images, figures, graphs and maps from each chapter of the text.

Recognising diversity: A word about language

The authors have a commitment to describing the social diversity of South Africa and the world. This commitment carries with it the responsibility to use language thoughtfully.

Using the terminology of race to categorise and describe large numbers of people is fraught with difficulty, not least because of sociology’s key insight that race is a social construct rather than an objective biological category. Nevertheless, in most cases, the chapters in this book adopt the terminology ‘white’, ‘coloured’, ‘Indian/Asian’ and ‘black African’, as used by the country’s national statistics agency, Statistics South Africa, to describe and analyse the similarity of material position and experiences of groups of people in our society. When reference is made to ‘black’ people, we mean all those who were designated ‘not white’ under apartheid and to whom affirmative action policies under the current democratic dispensation are directed. We do so while recognising that the continued use of these terms creates a tension between reinscribing the idea of race and acknowledging the inequalities for which it stands as well as the lived reality of most people in our society who sometimes do so willingly, but more often than not have little choice but to see and understand themselves and the lives of others in terms of race.

In a similar vein, the authors recognise the fluidity and diversity of gender and sexual identities. The acronym ‘LGBTQIA+’ is therefore used whenever possible to refer to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual or anything other than heterosexual. Exceptions to this acronym are used only when discussing research that specifically focuses and reports on only one or more specific gender and sexual identities.

In appreciation

The authors wish to thank Silvia Raninger, who continued to have faith in this project even when most available evidence pointed to its imminent collapse.

The deepest and most heartfelt thanks must, however, go to our copy editor, Louise Rapley, who time and time again seemed to wave a magic wand and turned our clumsy efforts at scribbling into polished works of fine writing. This book would simply not be what it is without her intelligent insight and expertise, and consistent dedication to the project as a whole.

For the student, may sociology change your life, as it has done for so many before you.

Louise Hagemeyer (with John J. Macionis)
Academic editor
February 2021

About the author

John J. Macionis (pronounced 'ma-SHOWnis') has been in the classroom teaching sociology for more than forty years. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he earned a bachelor's degree from Cornell University, majoring in sociology, and then completed a doctorate in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania. His publications are wide-ranging, focusing on community life in the United States, interpersonal intimacy in families, effective teaching, humour, new information technology and the importance of global education. In 2002, the American Sociological Association presented Macionis with the Award for Distinguished Contributions to Teaching, citing his innovative use of global material as well as the introduction of new teaching technology in his titles.

Prof. Macionis has been active in academic programmes in other countries, having travelled to some fifty nations. He retired from full-time teaching at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, where he was Professor and Distinguished Scholar of Sociology. He continues to enjoy extensive contact with students across the United States and around the world.

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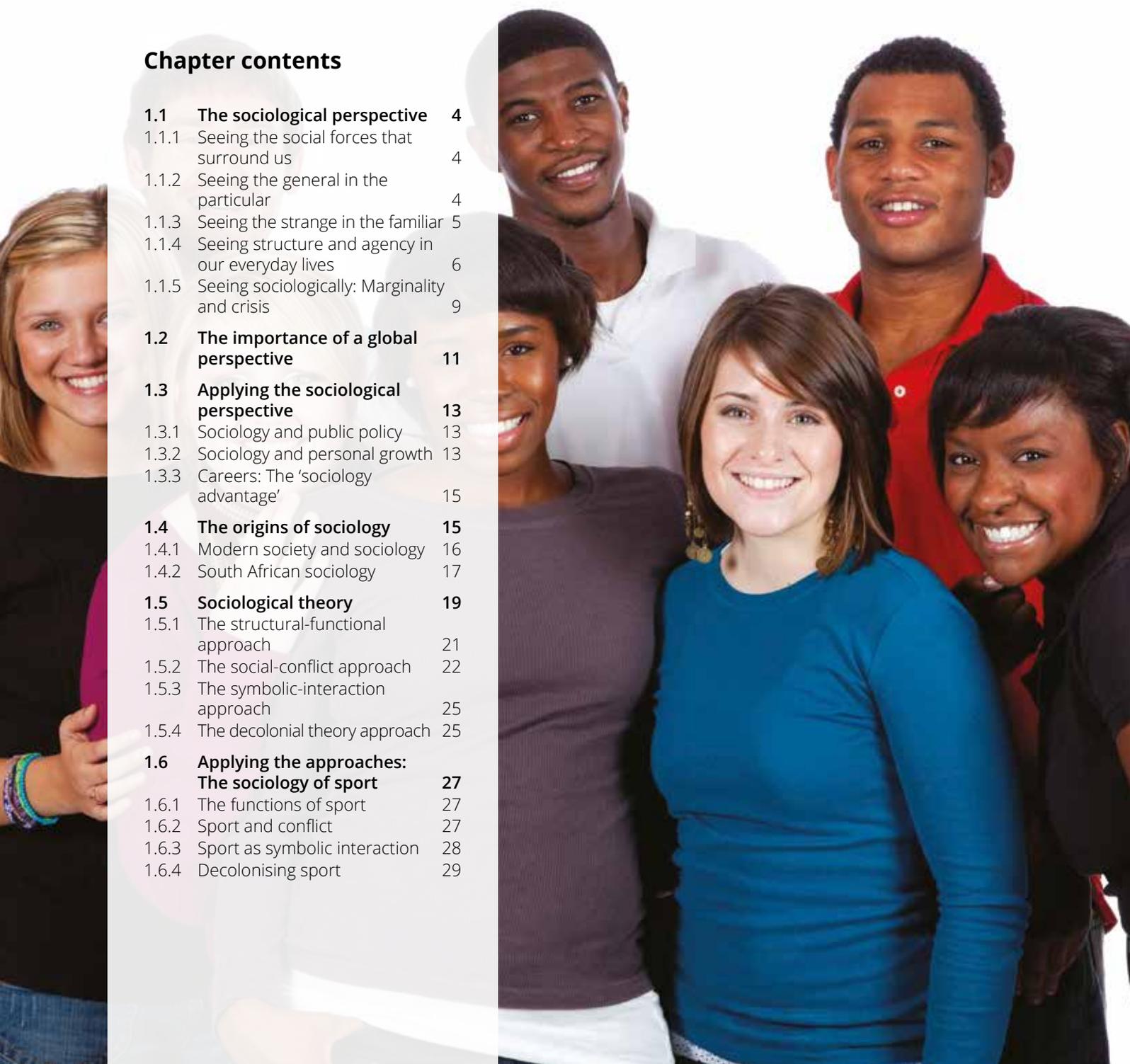
Chapter 1

The sociological perspective

Adapted by Louise Hagemeyer

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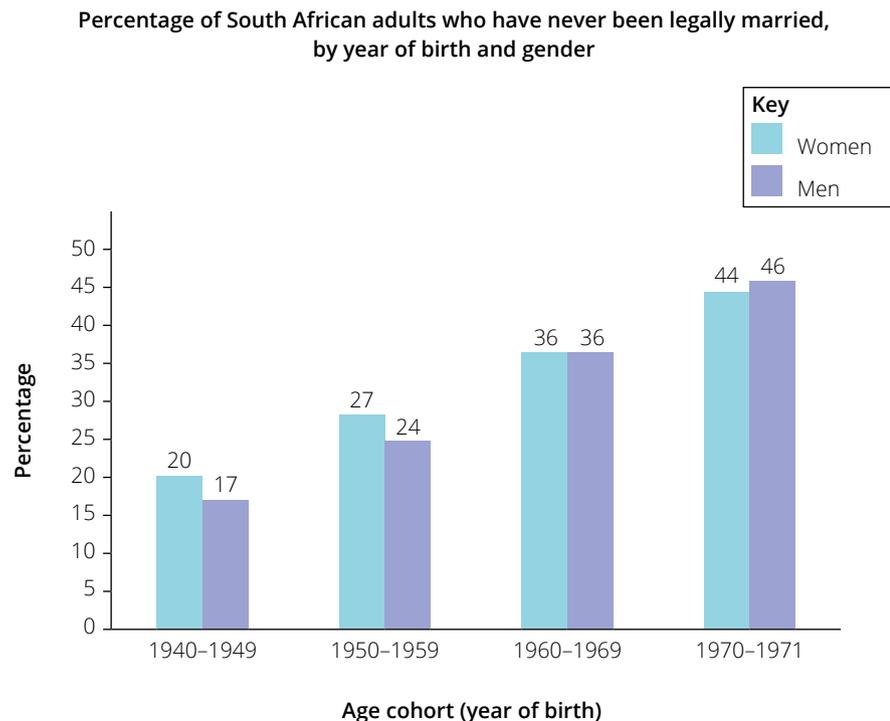


Learning objectives

- 1.1 Apply the sociological perspective to show how society shapes our individual lives.
- 1.2 State several reasons why a global perspective is important in today's world.
- 1.3 Identify the advantages of sociological thinking for developing public policy, for encouraging personal growth and for advancing in a career.
- 1.4 Link the origins of sociology to historical social changes.
- 1.5 Summarise sociology's major theoretical approaches.
- 1.6 Apply sociology's major theoretical approaches to the topic of sport.

The power of society ...

to shape whether we get married or not



Source: Created by author Hagemeyer from data in Garenne, 2016: 2416.

Is getting married simply a matter of individual choice? The proportion of South Africans forty years and older who have never been in a marriage legally recognised by the state has increased steadily over time. Analysis of data from the most recent census for South Africa in 2011 shows that while one in five (20%) women born between 1940 and 1949 had never married, this had increased to over one in four (27%) among those born in the following decade. The steady rise persists over time, as more than a third (36%) of women born between 1960 and 1969, and 44% of those born just in 1970 or 1971, had never married. The percentages for men in the same age cohorts, respectively, are 17, 24, 36 and 46%, showing a similar upward pattern. Recent generations of men and women therefore have parents and grandparents who were far more likely to have been married than they themselves. What explains this shift in nuptiality? We can fairly safely assume that the individual characteristics of people, such as physiology, personality, intelligence, motivation, desire and emotion, have not changed. What has changed is the type and features of the society in which we as individuals live, work, learn, and yes, marry. It is therefore to society and societal changes that we must look if we want to understand changes in the incidence of marriage.

Chapter overview

You are about to begin a course that could change your life. Sociology is a new and exciting way of understanding the world. It will change what you see and how you think about our world, and it may well change how you think about yourself. This first chapter introduces the discipline of sociology. The most important skill to gain from this chapter is the ability to use what we call the sociological perspective. This chapter also introduces sociological theory, which will help you build understanding from what you see using the sociological perspective.

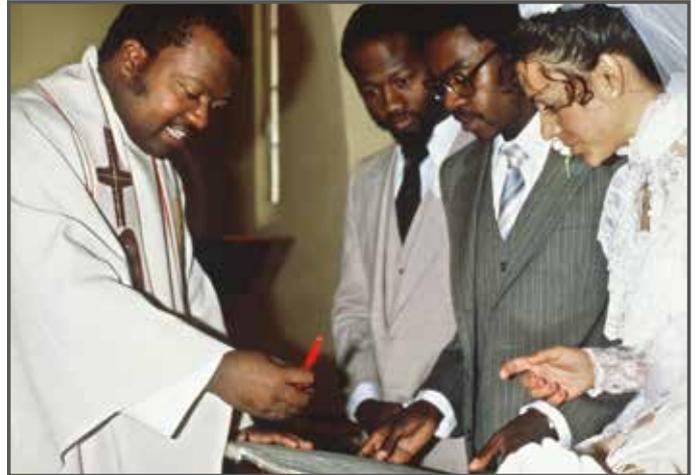
On 20 June 1985, Protas Madlala and Suzanne LeClerc were married in St Wendolins near Pinetown in the then Natal province (Brower, 1985). Their marriage made international news headlines, for they were the first mixed-race couple to marry in South Africa, one day after the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (No. 55 of 1949) was repealed. This apartheid law had, since 1949, forbidden marriage between people classified as ‘white’ and ‘black’ (which included black Africans, coloureds and Indians/Asians) in the country’s race-based classification system.

Fast forward twenty-one years to George, a town in the Western Cape. On 1 December 2006, Vernon Gibbs and Tony Halls were the first gay couple to be married under the just-passed Civil Union Act (No. 17 of 2006) (Meldrum, 2006). The Act allows two people to be married irrespective of their gender identity or sexual orientation, making South Africa the fifth country in the world to recognise same-sex marriage (Ntlama, 2010).

If we were to ask South Africans, “Why do people get married?” it is a safe bet that most people would reply, “Because they fall in love.” Most of us find it hard to imagine a happy marriage without love; for the same reason, when people fall in love, we expect them to think about getting married. However, love was not enough for the couples described here. Significant changes to South Africa’s legal system were required for them to marry their chosen partners.

These two examples show how a fundamental aspect of society (that is, the law) shapes the choices people are able to make. Society thus has an influence on individuals. You may very well ask whether society also influences our decision to get married and our choice of marital partners even when there is no legal obstacle to doing so. Consider the statistics presented in the graph in the ‘The power of society’ box on the previous page. They show that over time, fewer and fewer people are choosing to marry. For most of these people, the law presents no barrier to marriage. What restricts them then? A complex set of interrelated factors is highlighted in the literature. One of these factors has to do with the economy, where greater educational attainments and participation in the labour force have reduced women’s need to marry in order to ensure their own social and economic well-being. Rising rates of precarious employment and unemployment, together with irregular and unstable income, have denied many men the option of marriage. Cultural changes – including the rise of individualism, secularism and feminism – have diminished the value that people place on marriage. Moreover, increased acceptance of childbearing outside of marriage has reduced the pressure on many people to marry in order to have children. Conversely, some cultural traditions, such as the payment of bridewealth, continue to be valued. However, for some, the costs of bridewealth are prohibitive, resulting in delayed marriage or no marriage at all. Underlying all this is race, which shapes the extent to which people are subject to the sorts of economic, cultural, gender and other factors highlighted here (Magagula, 2009; Posel & Rudwick, 2013, 2012; Moore & Govender, 2013).

When it comes to marriage, then, the decisions people make do not simply result from the process philosophers call ‘free will’. Sociology shows us the power of society to guide all our life decisions in much the same way that the seasons influence our choice of clothing.



Protas Madlala and Suzanne LeClerc were the first mixed-race couple to be married in South Africa.

Source: Philip Littleton/AFP via Getty Images/Gallo Images.



Vernon Gibbs and Tony Halls were the first gay couple to be married in South Africa.

Source: Gianluigi Guercia/AFP via Getty Images/Gallo Images.

sociology

the systematic study of human society

society

people in a defined territory who interact with each other in interconnected economic, political, cultural and social relationships

sociological perspective

sociology's special insight that sees human behaviour as fundamentally shaped by the social context

social facts

social forces constructed by human beings that influence people to behave, interact, respond and think in certain ways

socialisation

the lifelong process of learning what is required to be a member of human society

1.1 The sociological perspective

1.1 Apply the sociological perspective to show how society shapes our individual lives.

Sociology is the systematic study of human society. In short, **society** refers to the people in a defined territory who interact with each other in interconnected economic, political, cultural and social relationships. At the heart of sociology's investigation of society is a special point of view called the **sociological perspective**. The sociological perspective revolves around one fundamental insight: that human behaviour is largely shaped by the social context in which it occurs. In other words, if we want to understand how and why we do the things we do, we need to look not only at our own individual characteristics, but also, more importantly, at the social forces that impact on us every day and throughout our lives.

1.1.1 Seeing the social forces that surround us

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) is considered to be one of the pioneers of the discipline of sociology, precisely because he helped to define its subject matter. At the time that Durkheim was writing in France in the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was thought that the disciplines of biology, psychology and philosophy were enough to study and understand human behaviour (Ritzer, 2000). Durkheim disagreed. He argued that human behaviour cannot be understood by looking only at the individual's genes, brain chemistry, emotions, personality or ethics, as these disciplines do. There are also, he argued, things that are distinctly social that influence our behaviour. He termed these things **social facts**, and it is these social facts that sociologists must study. He went on to define social facts as “every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint” (Durkheim, 1950: 13, orig. 1895). This is a difficult definition, but to put it more simply, social facts are the social forces constructed by human beings that influence people to behave, interact, respond and think in certain ways. They include society itself; social institutions such as the economy, law, religion, media, family and education; the social stratification systems based on race, class, gender, ethnicity and age; the values, norms, customs, language and obligations comprising the culture of groups and the whole society; and all the regular, patterned behaviours or actions we engage in during interactions with others, such as a handshake, queuing, eating and so on.

What makes these social facts? Durkheim pointed to three defining features of social facts (see Ritzer, 2000; Jones, 1986). The first, that social facts are general, means that they apply to everyone in society. The economy, for example, is a social fact because everyone is in some way involved in or affected by the economy of the society in which they live. Second, social facts are external to any one individual in society. By this, he meant that social facts are not individual characteristics and they do not rely on any one individual for their existence. The ‘rule’ of raising your hand when you want to speak in the classroom will continue to exist even if you as an individual are no longer here or do not follow the rule. Social facts are thus also not innate. In other words, you are not born knowing the social facts, and need to be shown and taught them. Third, social facts have constraining power because they influence us to behave in the ways our society accepts and expects. Every time you order a takeaway meal, get on the bus, attend a lecture, dress up for a date, enter a lift, pray for guidance and do all the hundreds of other things you do daily, you are following the rules of social life. Most of the time, you do not feel forced to do so because you have been taught these rules and expectations from when you were born. Sociologists call this process of learning to be a member of society **socialisation**.

1.1.2 Seeing the general in the particular

Another important dimension to the sociological perspective is seeing the general in the particular (Berger, 1963). This dimension tells us that sociologists look for general patterns in the behaviour of particular people. Although every individual is unique, a society shapes the lives of people in patterned ways that are evident as we discover how various categories (such as children and adults, women and men, the rich and the poor) live differently. We begin to see the world sociologically by realising how the general categories into which we fall shape our particular life experiences.

If we extend our marriage example to consider not only whether people get married, but also to whom they get married, general patterns emerge for this too. Research shows that the large majority of couples who marry are heterosexual, marrying for the first time, about the same age, have similar educational and social class backgrounds, and share the same racial and ethnic identity (Statistics South Africa, 2018a, 2013; Amoateng & Heaton, 2017; Palamuleni, 2010; Kalule-Sabiti, Palamuleni, Makiwane & Amoateng, 2007). Is it merely the case that all these individuals just happen to be making the same kinds of choices in selecting a partner? The simple answer is no.

The sociological perspective allows us to see instead that the social categories to which we belong influence the families from which we come, the places where we live, the jobs we do, the schools and universities we attend, the leisure activities we pursue, the religions to which we adhere and the cultural traditions we uphold, among others. These in turn fundamentally shape who we are likely to encounter as potential marital partners, and who, ultimately, we end up marrying.



We can easily see the power of society over the individual by imagining how different our lives would be had we been born in the place of any of these children from, respectively, the United States, Kenya, Palestine, Peru, South Korea and India.

Sources: Anna Om/123rf.com; Lucian Coman/Shutterstock; Zurijeta/Shutterstock; Ruslana Iurchenko/Shutterstock; imtmphoto/Shutterstock; V.S. Anandhakrishna/Shutterstock.

This text explores the power of society to guide our actions, thoughts and feelings. We may think that marriage results simply from the personal feelings of love. However, the sociological perspective shows us that factors such as age, schooling, race and ethnicity, sex and social class guide our selection of a partner. It might be more accurate to think of love as a feeling we have for others who match up with what society teaches us to want in a mate.

1.1.3 Seeing the strange in the familiar

Using the sociological perspective also means seeing the strange in the familiar. Consider how you might react if someone were to say to you, “You fit all the right categories that society has guided me to think are appropriate, so you would make a wonderful spouse!” We take it for granted that people fall in love and decide to marry based on personal feelings. But the sociological perspective demands that we reconsider this and other **conventional wisdoms**. It does this by requiring that we look at our own life and the lives of others as a stranger would, as if seeing them for the first time. In doing so, we are likely to notice things we have never even seen before, precisely because they are so familiar. Most importantly, we would begin to see how society shapes what we think and do.

Because we live in an individualistic society, learning to see how society affects us may take a bit of practice. It is perhaps easier to think first about some examples where you are, in fact, the stranger.

All societies must dispose of their dead in some way. For the Parsees in India, following the Zoroastrian faith, a body must undergo a cleansing ceremony after death, after which it is taken to a *dakhma*, a round stone platform, for it to be consumed by vultures (Zykov, 2016). In the Philippines, the Caviteño use hollowed-out trees as burial places. A law that requires a grave’s removal after sixty years has led South Korean families to turn the ashes of their loved ones into beads for display at home (May, 2013). These practices are probably strange to you precisely

conventional wisdoms
ideas taken for granted as being true, usually without question

because they are so unlike the burial or cremation with which you are most familiar. Note, though, that the Parsee Indians, Caviteño and South Koreans would probably consider your practices strange. The sociological perspective allows you to see that the timing, method and rituals that accompany the process of disposing of the dead differ from society to society, and they do so because the world view, religion, geographical reality, laws and financial status of the communities in which they take place are different.

Does society affect you, and if so, how? Let's turn to something with which you will be very familiar. If someone asked you why you 'chose' to enrol at a particular university or college, you might offer one of the following reasons:

"I wanted to stay close to home."

"I got a bursary to do a teaching degree."

"With an IT diploma from this college, I can get a good job."

"My girlfriend goes to university here."

"I didn't get into the university I really wanted to attend."

Any of these responses may well be true. But do they tell the whole story?

Thinking sociologically about going to university, it is important to realise that a century ago, across the world, most people had little or no chance of going on to higher education. Today, enrolling for some qualification after school is within the reach of many more men and women. However, a look around the lecture theatre or tutorial room shows that social forces still have much to do with who ends up on campus. For instance, most students in higher education in South Africa are young, generally between the ages of eighteen and about thirty years, with the highest percentage being those aged between eighteen and twenty (Statistics South Africa, 2017a: 52). Why? Because our society links tertiary education to this period of life, when individuals are setting themselves up for independent adulthood, participating in the labour force and establishing their own families. Nevertheless, more than age is involved because just 19% of men and women between the ages of twenty and twenty-four end up on campuses in South Africa (Jansen, 2018: 1), and these 19% come from only the small proportion of learners whose results in the National Senior Certificate examinations qualify them for higher education studies. Moreover, they are able to afford the costs of studying or were able to get funding to do so. Another factor is gender. Well over half (58.1%) of students registered at public higher education institutions in South Africa are women, compared to only 41.9% for men (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018: 13). Yet women are, respectively, under- and over-represented in particular fields of study, so that, for example, women made up only 28.5% of enrolments in engineering, manufacturing and construction in 2012, while making up 78–79% each for enrolments in the education and services study areas (Development Policy Research Unit, 2015). Another factor is race. While 57% of white South Africans between the ages of twenty and twenty-four are registered students at public higher education institutions, only 14.4% of coloured, 16.5% of black African and 47% of those classified Indian/Asian in this age category are similarly enrolled (author's calculation from Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018; Statistics South Africa, 2017a). In addition, three-quarters of students between the ages of twenty and thirty-four years in post-secondary institutions in South Africa have parents who have completed at least some secondary schooling, and over half (54%) have parents who have completed matric or attained a post-secondary school qualification (Statistics South Africa, 2017a: 82).

Is it reasonable, in light of these facts, to ignore the power of society and say that attending a higher education institution is merely a matter of personal choice?

1.1.4 Seeing structure and agency in our everyday lives

Another way to appreciate the sociological perspective is to consider the interplay between structure and agency. Sociologists use the term **social structure** to encapsulate all the social facts or forces that shape our lives. Social structure is thus understood as the complex framework of social groups, social institutions, culture and processes that make up a society, and within which humans establish relationships and interact with each other. **Agency**, on the other hand, is every individual's capacity to make decisions, plans and choices, to interpret their surroundings and to act on these (Scott & Marshall, 2005: 9–10). When sociologists seek to understand something, they take the roles of both structure and agency into account. Figure 1.1 provides a diagrammatic representation of this aspect of the sociological perspective. It shows how the individual agent is surrounded by the social structure – groups, institutions, relations, stratification, culture and processes – that shapes their lives, even as they have the capacity to make independent choices, plans and decisions. It is important to note that these forces and the agent are overlaid with one another, to show the often complex interplay between them.

social structure

the complex framework of social forces that shape human lives in society

agency

human capacity to interpret the social world, to make decisions, plans and choices, and to act on these

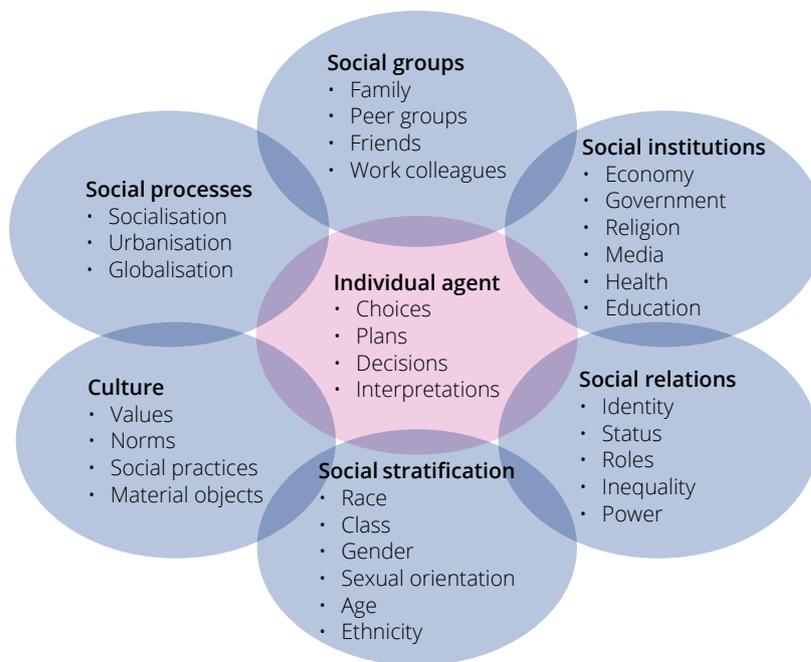


Figure 1.1: The sociological perspective: The interplay between structure and agency

Source: Created by author Hagemeyer.

For example, consider the number of children women have. As shown in Global map 1.1, women in South Africa have an average of 2.4 children during their lifetimes. In comparison, women in other countries have fewer children. For example, Taiwanese women have 1.1 children on average, while in Austria, the United States and Sri Lanka, the averages are 1.5, 1.7 and 2.2 per woman, respectively. Conversely, women in some countries have many more children than their South African counterparts. In Haiti, for example, the average is about three; in Iraq, about four; in Afghanistan, five; in Niger, six; and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the average woman has around seven children (United Nations, 2019; Statistics South Africa, 2017b, 2018b).

What accounts for these striking differences? Women do have agency, and are therefore able to make decisions about whether to have children and how many to have. However, the extent to which they can exercise this agency varies because the social structure in which they are embedded either constrains or facilitates their capacity to make these choices. Women in poorer countries have fewer schooling, work and other economic opportunities; for many, their lives are thus centred around the home and family. Strained health services may limit their access to contraception. Unlike in wealthier countries, children may be considered an economic resource rather than an economic cost, encouraging higher childbearing rates. As a middle-income country (discussed later in this chapter), South Africa falls somewhere in between these two extremes. Even so, the average figure of 2.4 children per woman masks significant racial differences because fertility rates are highest for black African and coloured women, and lowest for white and Indian/Asian women (Statistics South Africa, 2015). These rates reflect the relative economic standing of the racial groups in South Africa. Over and beyond this, childbearing for all women is shaped by religion, ethnicity, culture, region, marital status and educational attainment. The main point is this: society has much to do with the decisions women and men make about childbearing.

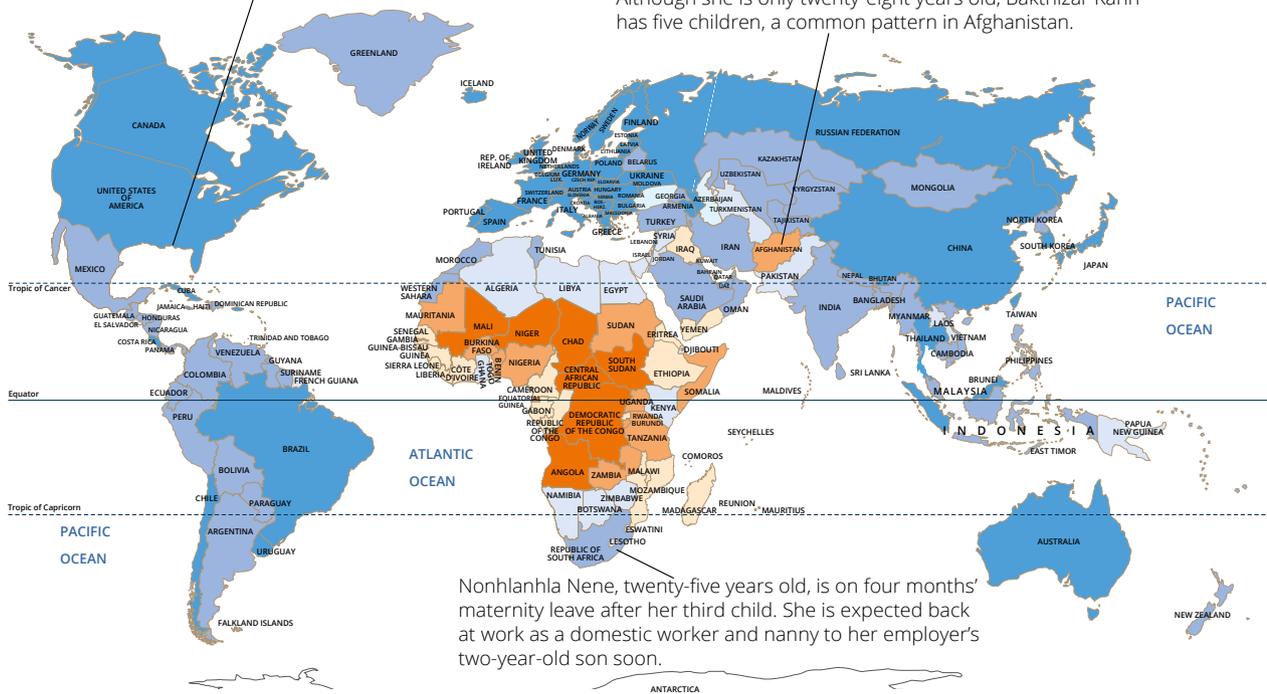
Another illustration of the power of society to shape even our most private choices comes from the study of suicide. What could be a more personal choice than the decision to end your own life? However, Durkheim, mentioned earlier, showed that even here, social forces are at work. He acknowledged that each individual may have a very specific reason for committing suicide, whether it is debt, depression, drug abuse, divorce or anything else, but this did not concern him. He was interested in understanding the relative **rates** of suicide for groups of individuals. Examining official records in his own country, France, Durkheim found that some categories of people were more likely to take their own lives than others. Men, Protestants, wealthy people and the unmarried had much higher suicide rates than women, Catholics and Jews, the poor and married people. Durkheim pointed out that the rate is a characteristic of the group, and not of an individual, and thus could only be explained by a social force impacting on the group as a whole. He thus sought to identify the social cause for variations in suicide rates. Durkheim explained the differences in terms of social integration: categories of people with strong social ties had low suicide rates, while more individualistic categories of people had high suicide rates.

rate
the number of times something happens, as a proportion of a whole

Window on the world

Cindy Rucker, twenty-nine years old, recently took time off from her job in the New Orleans public school system to have her first child.

Although she is only twenty-eight years old, Baktizhar Kahn has five children, a common pattern in Afghanistan.



Nonhlanhla Nene, twenty-five years old, is on four months' maternity leave after her third child. She is expected back at work as a domestic worker and nanny to her employer's two-year-old son soon.

Global map 1.1: Women's childbearing in global perspective

Is childbearing simply a matter of personal choice? A look around the world shows that it is not. In general, women living in poor countries have many more children than women in rich nations. Can you point to some of the reasons for this global disparity? In simple terms, such differences mean that if you had been born into another society (whether you are female or male), your life might be quite different from what it is now.

Source: Created by author Hagemeyer from data in United Nations, 2019.

Key

Average number of births per woman

- 6 and higher
- 5-5.9
- 4-4.9
- 3-3.9
- 2-2.9
- 1-1.9

In Durkheim's time, men had much more freedom than women. But despite its advantages, freedom weakens social ties and thus increases the risk of suicide. Likewise, more individualistic Protestants were more likely to commit suicide than more tradition-bound Catholics and Jews, whose rituals encourage stronger social ties. The wealthy have much more freedom than the poor, but once again, at the cost of a higher suicide rate.

A century later, Durkheim's analysis still holds true. While the statistics for suicide in South Africa are limited, those that are available show a distinct gender and age dimension. The suicide rate for men is far higher than it is for women. In 2016, there were 21.7 recorded suicides for every hundred thousand men, a rate four times higher than the 5.1 for every hundred thousand women (World Health Organization, n.d.). Figure 1.2 shows the number of suicides for various categories of people in South Africa. Almost three-quarters (73.2% of a total of 363 cases) of all suicides in South Africa in 2017 were committed by people in the age category fifteen to forty-four years (Statistics South Africa, 2020: 51). In addition, more men committed suicide than women.

Even today, men are comparatively less integrated into social groups than women, where society's gendered expectations tie women into more extensive and stronger family, household, community, religious, charity and work support networks. In the event of individual hardship, men are therefore more likely to take their own lives.

Diversity snapshot

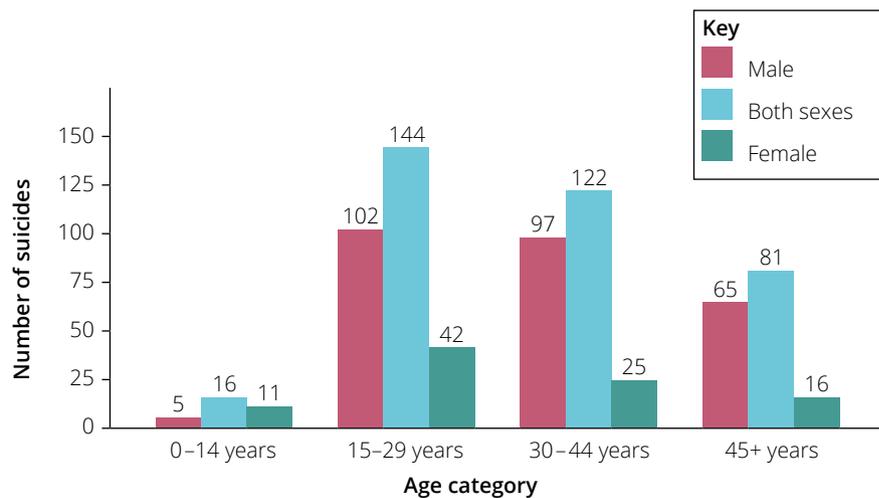


Figure 1.2: The number of suicides in South Africa by age and sex, 2017

The total number of suicides in 2017 in South Africa was 363. Most suicides were committed by people in the age category fifteen to twenty-nine years, followed by thirty to forty-four years. Except for the youngest age category, far fewer females commit suicide than males. Why do you think more girls than boys younger than age fourteen years took their own lives?

Source: Created by author Hagemeyer from data in Statistics South Africa, 2020: 51.

For all people, regardless of gender, the age categories fifteen to twenty-nine years and thirty to forty-four years mark the period in the lifespan when many changes are likely to occur. These include leaving school, moving out of home, starting higher education studies or a new job, changing jobs, getting married, having children, getting divorced, moving house, becoming ill, losing a parent, emigrating and so on. These changes may threaten the level of social integration for individuals in this age category so that the social bonds that tie them into established and familiar social groups may disappear or become seriously weakened. This, in turn, influences the likelihood or not of individuals committing suicide.

In short, using suicide as a case study, Durkheim emphasised the general patterns in the personal actions of particular individuals. His hope was that sociologists would identify these patterns in other aspects of human behaviour.

1.1.5 Seeing sociologically: Marginality and crisis

Anyone can learn to see the world using the sociological perspective. However, two situations help people see clearly how society shapes individual lives: living on the margins of society and living through a social crisis.

From time to time, everyone feels like an outsider. For some categories of people, however, being an outsider – not part of the dominant group – is an everyday experience. The greater people's social marginality, the better they are able to use the sociological perspective.

For example, no person who self-identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex can be oblivious to the importance of gender identity and sexual orientation in shaping people's lives. Commonly referred to as the **LGBTQIA+** community, they are a community precisely for this reason, even if they do not live in the same area, speak the same language, have the same religion, culture or traditions, or interact in shared social activities. Their daily lives are an experience in the myriad ways in which their so-called difference (from the traditional heterosexual gender roles expected of men and women in society) makes them the subject of ridicule, condemnation, discrimination and physical violence, sometimes even murder. In 2017, an alarming two out of five lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) South Africans knew of someone who had been murdered 'for being or suspected of being' lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (Morris, 2017). A study focusing specifically on LGBT youth conducted by OUT, an organisation that provides health services to the LGBTQIA+ community, found that 40% of these youth are likely to contemplate, plan or attempt suicide, in contrast to the 15% of heterosexuals of the same age who do the same (De Barros, 2018).

LGBTQIA+
lesbian, gay, bisexual,
transgender, queer, intersex,
asexual and everyone with any
gender identity



People at the margins of society, who feel the full force of social expectations simply because they cannot or do not wish to meet these expectations, are usually better able to apply the sociological perspective. Visual activist Zanele Muholi documents the experiences of black African LGBTQIA+ South Africans in her photographic and video work, thereby increasing their visibility in a society that marginalises them.

Source: Gallo Images/Sunday Times/Kevin Sutherland.

Photographs and installations by the visual activist Zanele Muholi document the experiences of black African LGBTQIA+ people and increase their visibility in a society that either ignores them or portrays them in a negative light. The musician Nakhane Touré addresses gay themes in his songs and videos, and in 2018 starred in the controversial film *Inxeba* (isiXhosa for ‘The Wound’). Directed by gay film director John Trengove, the film tells the story of a closeted romantic relationship between two men during the annual retreat to the mountains for the traditional Xhosa initiation ceremony in the Eastern Cape. The film evoked outrage from many sectors of South African society, including politicians as well as traditional and religious leaders. Its classification by the Film and Publication Board as X18, reserved for hard-core pornography even though it contains none, and banning from some cinemas, show the levels of homophobia and intolerance in our society. It is no wonder, then, that LGBTQIA+ people feel oppressed, feel that they have no place in society, and believe that their hopes and dreams have no chance of being realised. As the dominant majority, heterosexuals and people who conform to traditional gender expectations think less often about sexuality and gender identity. They have no need to because heterosexuality and conventional expressions of masculinity and femininity are not cause for ridicule or discrimination.

All people at the margins of social life – including black African and coloured people, women, the poor, people with disabilities and the very old – are aware of social patterns that others rarely think about. To become better at using the sociological perspective, we must step back from our familiar routines and look at our own lives with a new curiosity.

Periods of change or crisis make everyone feel a little off balance, encouraging us to use the sociological perspective. The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) illustrated this idea using the Great Depression of the 1930s. As the unemployment rate soared to 25% in the United States, people who were out of work could not help but see

general social forces at work in their particular lives. Rather than saying, “Something must be wrong with me; I can’t find a job,” they took a sociological approach and realised, “The economy has collapsed; there are no jobs to be found!” Mills believed that using what he called the ‘sociological imagination’ in this way helps people understand their own lives as well as their society because the two are closely related. The ‘Seeing sociology in everyday life’ box that follows takes a closer look at how changes that may seem personal are often linked to broader changes in the society.

Seeing sociology in everyday life

The sociological imagination: Turning personal problems into public issues

Rumours of impending retrenchments were uppermost in the minds of Vukile Shamase and his fellow mineworkers as they made their way to the cage that would take them back up to the surface from underground. The rumours dominated the conversations of workers as they stood in knots at the shaft station. All Vukile could think about was that if the rumours were true, he was likely to be one of those retrenched. Five years ago, he had been employed as an assistant to a rock drill operator on this mine in Rustenburg, a job he thought would last forever. After all, the platinum was in the rock, and you had to drill it out. It was not a job he had planned to stay in forever, though. He had thought that if he worked hard, showed initiative, developed his skills, followed the rules, he could move up and become an operator himself. He felt like a failure, even if he hadn’t been retrenched – yet. Later that evening, over drinks with other workers, Vukile realised he was not alone. Almost all the other workers felt the same way. The discussion also revolved around the reasons why their jobs were under threat: mechanisation advances in the mining process, the global slump in the demand for and prices of gold and platinum, changes in the automotive and jewellery manufacturing industries worldwide, cost-cutting strategies by mine owners in the face of falling profits ... the list went on. Vukile began to understand that his possible retrenchment was not entirely due to his own shortcomings or those of his colleagues. They resolved to speak to their union representatives as soon as possible so that they could have a collective voice with which to speak to management about their concerns and perhaps work together to find solutions.

In good times and in bad, the power of the sociological perspective lies in making sense of our individual lives. We see that many of our particular problems (and our successes as well) are not unique to us, but are the result of larger social trends. Half a century ago, sociologist C. Wright Mills pointed to the power of what he called the ‘sociological imagination’ to help us understand everyday events. As he saw it, society – not people’s personal failings – is the main cause of poverty and other social problems. By turning personal problems into public issues, the sociological imagination is also the key to bringing people together to create needed change. In this excerpt, Mills (1959: 3–5) explains the need for a sociological imagination:*

* In this excerpt, Mills uses ‘man’ and male pronouns to apply to all people. As far as gender was concerned, even this outspoken critic of society reflected the conventional language of his time.

"When society becomes industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change. ... The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the society in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kind of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of men and society, of biography and history, of self and world ...

What they need ... is a quality of mind that will help them [see] what is going on in the world and ... what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality ... [that] may be called the sociological imagination."

What do you think?

1. How are personal troubles different from public issues? Explain this difference in terms of what happened to Vukile in the story above.
2. Why do we often blame ourselves for the personal problems we face?
3. Do you think everyone is as likely to blame themselves for the problems they face? Why or why not?
4. How can using the sociological imagination give us the power to change the world?

Mills's approach to the discipline can be summed up in one sentence: a sociological imagination can transform individual lives as it changes society. As Mills saw it, sociology is not some dry enterprise detached from life. Rather, he held up sociology as an escape from the 'traps' of our lives because it can show us that society – not our own foibles or failings – is responsible for many of our problems. In this way, Mills maintained, sociology transforms personal problems into political issues.

Just as social change encourages sociological thinking, sociological thinking can bring about social change. The more we learn about how 'the system' operates, the more we may want to change it in some way. Becoming aware of the power of race, for example, has led many people, across all racial categories, to become involved in projects and other initiatives to address racial inequalities in our society.

1.2 The importance of a global perspective

1.2 State several reasons why a global perspective is important in today's world.

As new information technology draws even the farthest reaches of the planet closer together, many academic disciplines are taking a **global perspective**: that is, the study of the larger world and our society's place in it. What is the importance of a global perspective for sociology?

First, global awareness is a logical extension of the sociological perspective. Sociology shows us that our place in society shapes our life experiences. It stands to reason, then, that the position of our society in the larger world system affects everyone in South Africa.

What does this world system look like, though? If we focused only on levels of economic development, we could divide the world's 218 independent countries and territories into three broad categories (see Global map 13.1) (World Bank, n.d., 2019, 2020).

High-income countries are the nations with the highest overall standards of living and human development. The eighty-one countries in this category include the United States and Canada, Argentina, the nations of Western Europe, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan and Australia. Taken together, these nations produce most of the world's goods and services, and the people who live there own most of the planet's wealth. Economically speaking, people in these countries are very well off, not because they are smarter or work harder than anyone else, but because they were lucky enough to be born in a rich region of the world.

South Africa belongs to the category of **middle-income countries**, nations with a standard of living about average for the world as a whole. People in any of these 103 nations – many of the countries of Eastern Europe, some of Africa, and almost all of Latin America and Asia – are as likely to live in rural villages as in cities and to walk or ride tractors, scooters, bicycles or animals as to drive automobiles. On average, they receive eight years of schooling. Most middle-income countries also have considerable social inequality within their own borders, so that some people

global perspective
awareness of the larger world
and our society's place in it

high-income countries
nations with the highest overall
standards of living and human
development

middle-income countries
nations with a standard of living
and human development about
average for the world as a whole

low-income countries

nations with a low standard of living and level of human development in which most people are poor

are extremely rich (members of the business elite in nations across North Africa, for example, as well as in South Africa), but many more lack safe housing and adequate nutrition (people living in the informal settlements of South Africa, and in countries such as Peru and India).

The remaining thirty-four nations of the world are **low-income countries**, nations with a low standard of living and a low level of human development in which most people are poor. Most of the poorest countries in the world are in Africa and a few are in Asia. Here again, a few people are rich, but the majority struggle to get by, with poor housing, unsafe water, too little food and, perhaps most serious of all, little chance to improve their lives.

Chapter 13 ('Global stratification and development') explains the causes and consequences of global wealth and poverty. However, every chapter of this text makes comparisons between South Africa and other nations for four reasons:

1. **Where we live shapes the lives we lead.** As we saw earlier, women living in rich and poor countries have different lives, as suggested by the number of children they have. To understand ourselves and appreciate how others live, we must understand something about how countries differ, which is one good reason to pay attention to the global maps found throughout this text.
2. **Societies throughout the world are increasingly interconnected.** Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher, coined the phrase the 'global village' in the 1960s to describe this interconnectedness of the world's societies. It is even more extensive today, as further developments in electronic technology allow us to transmit sounds, pictures and written documents around the globe in seconds. Sociologists are concerned with the political, economic, cultural and social dimensions of globalisation, and their impact on societies and the lives of individuals in societies. For example, think about the influence of the United States on our tastes in food, clothing and music in South Africa, where many of us are as likely to eat a Big Mac, wear Nike shoes and listen to hip-hop as someone in the United States. Conversely, South Africa also has an impact on societies outside its borders, when people in Nigeria, for example, shop at a Checkers store, buy an MTN airtime voucher or relax to the music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo.
3. **What happens in the rest of the world affects life here in South Africa.** Trade across national boundaries has created a global economy. Large corporations make and market goods worldwide. Stock traders in Johannesburg pay close attention to the financial markets in New York, London and Tokyo, even as wheat farmers in the Free State province watch the price of grain in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. Many different types of job now involve international trade, and so global understanding has never been more important. As nations such as Brazil, Russia, India and China have expanded their economic production, factories may close down in South Africa or move operations overseas, impacting on employment here. The clothing, textiles, footwear and leather industry in the Western Cape is one important example of this, where jobs have been lost due to competition from overseas, necessitating government intervention to prevent excessive imports of cheap clothing, shoes and homeware (Van der Westhuizen, 2007).
However, the fact that events have global effects extends beyond the economy to include political, social and even health-related issues. A virus outbreak in one country may have serious repercussions for countries in its immediate vicinity as well as for the rest of the world. Such was the case in 2020, when an outbreak of a novel coronavirus in China in December 2019 quickly turned into a global pandemic. Causing widespread illness and death, and the imposition of extensive lockdowns by governments to curb its spread, no event in recent memory has done more to bring home the fact that all of us on the planet are connected in one way or another.
4. **Thinking globally helps us learn more about ourselves.** We cannot visit another country without thinking about what it means to live in South Africa. Comparing life in various settings also leads to unexpected lessons. For instance, were you to visit the Santa Marta *favela* (Portuguese for 'slum area') in Brazil, you would find that the community has taken responsibility for introducing photovoltaic panels that use sunlight as a green solution to their energy supply problems (Cascardo, 2018). If you were to work in the Netherlands, you would find that the average working hours per week are about thirty hours, thus around six hours per day, because Dutch laws specifically foster a work–life balance (Dodds, 2017). Are we able to mobilise poor communities and the government in South Africa to implement similar strategies and policies to improve the lives of our people here?

In sum, in an increasingly interconnected world, we can understand ourselves only to the extent to which we understand others. Sociology is an invitation to learn a new way of looking at the world around us. But is this invitation worth accepting? What are the benefits of applying the sociological perspective?

1.3 Applying the sociological perspective

1.3 Identify the advantages of sociological thinking for developing public policy, for encouraging personal growth and for advancing in a career.

Applying the sociological perspective is useful in many ways. First, sociology is at work guiding many of the laws and policies that shape our lives. Second, on an individual level, making use of the sociological perspective leads to important personal growth and expanded awareness. Third, studying sociology is excellent preparation for the world of work.

1.3.1 Sociology and public policy

Sociologists have helped shape public policy – the laws and regulations that guide how people in communities live and work – in countless ways, from the design and justification for apartheid in South Africa, as you will see later, to the strategies for bringing about a meaningful transformation of the society in the democratic era. Here are three examples: Lael Bethlehem has been involved in urban renewal in Johannesburg, Prishani Naidoo has assisted the Anti-Privatisation Forum to campaign for the poor’s right to basic needs such as water and electricity, and Paul Stewart’s research on workers’ rights to refuse dangerous work has led to a significant change in occupational health and safety legislation.

1.3.2 Sociology and personal growth

By applying the sociological perspective, we are likely to become more active and aware, and to think more critically in our daily lives. Using sociology benefits us in four ways:

- 1. The sociological perspective helps us assess the truth of ‘common sense’.** We all take many things for granted, but that does not make them true. One good example is the idea that we are free individuals who are personally responsible for our own lives. If we think we decide our own fate, we may be quick to praise very successful people as superior and consider others with fewer achievements personally deficient. A sociological approach, by contrast, encourages us to ask whether such common beliefs are actually true and, to the extent that they are not, why they are so widely held. The ‘Thinking about diversity’ box that follows takes a look at call-centre jobs and explains how the sociological perspective sometimes makes us rethink common-sense ideas about other people and their work.

Thinking about diversity

The voices at the end of the telephone line: Call-centre agents in an Eastern Cape municipality

All of us must engage with the state at some point in our lives, whether it is to apply for a birth, marriage or death certificate, to get a car or driver’s licence, to pay for services such as water and electricity or to vote in an election. Some of our encounters are at the national level; many more are with our local government. The media report on a range of different experiences: some people tell of efficient and effective service from local government officials, while others convey stories of frustration at poor service and complicated bureaucratic processes. In these cases, we often attribute our negative encounters to government employees who are incompetent, lazy, take no pride in their work, have no service ethos and do only enough to ensure that they get their salary at the end of the month. How accurate are these explanations?

As part of her master’s degree in industrial sociology at Rhodes University, Babalwa Magoqwana (2009) studied the working conditions and experiences of front-line workers in two call centres in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. Following the democratic transition in 1994, the South African government adopted the principle of *Batho Pele* (‘People first’) in setting its objectives of transforming and improving the extent and quality of municipal service delivery to local citizens. Taking the lead from their use in private business, the government introduced municipal call centres as a key strategy to achieve this aim. Government employees in call centres respond to telephone calls from local residents, recording and processing their enquiries and complaints.

In her research, Magoqwana analysed data from semi-structured interviews and observations, and concluded that the “work environment is not conducive to the goals of customer satisfaction as presented in the *Batho Pele* policies [and that] ... the conditions of workers [are] one explanatory factor for poor call-centre service” (2009: ii). What are these work conditions? In the first instance, recruitment practices for call-centre agents are flawed. While knowledgeable and experienced workers from within the municipality are drawn into these centres, they are not trained in customer care and receive very little training once placed in their positions. Supervisors are expected to take responsibility for training their agent teams, but this is highly dependent on individual supervisors and the quality of training is uneven. Second, there is a shortage of staff as well as a high turnover of staff

in call centres. Long-term continuity and experience are therefore lacking, hampering the transfer and development of skills for new and inexperienced agents. Furthermore, consistently high levels of managerial surveillance of agents not only individualises the work experience, hindering cooperation and team work, but facilitates infighting and gossip. Strict rules regarding the permitted duration of telephone calls with customers make it difficult for agents to deal adequately with customer concerns. In addition, the work environment is highly stressful as a result of the particular conditions under which agents are expected to perform their duties. These include lack of or inefficient service delivery from the back offices (for example, in correcting billing errors and addressing service problems such as burst pipes or electricity faults). This is compounded by a lack of internal communication between the various municipal offices. Another source of stress is customer attitudes directed at agents, ranging from anger and irritation to rudeness and racism (Magoqwana, 2009).



A sociological perspective can provide a more nuanced explanation of the experiences we have when contacting a customer service call centre.

Source: Shutterstock.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, 'common sense' tells us that the jobs people have and the amount of money they make reflect their personal abilities as well as their willingness to work hard. Call-centre work is not considered a prestigious job in our society, and in fact, Magoqwana found that many of the agents she spoke to had no desire to remain in their positions for long, but were planning to move to other positions as soon as the opportunity arose.

Magoqwana's research helps us to reject quite a lot of common sense. There is more to our frustrating experiences with local government than employees who are lazy, incompetent or unwilling to work hard. Call-centre work is not easy work; it involves much more than just answering the telephone all day and entering residents' complaints into a computer database. It takes special skills to understand a customer's particular concern, to record it appropriately, and to be able to manage that customer's feelings of worry and frustration. Call-centre agents do not wilfully ignore customer telephone calls, even if it seems so to the customer who has been put on hold for a lengthy period of time without a response. In fact, there are systems in place that record, for each individual agent, both the response time to a call and the duration of the call. A shortage of staff can, however, delay the time taken to respond. Long shifts, low wages, night work, and travelling between home and work (especially for women) at night all add to the stress of the job.

What do you think?

1. Have you ever held a low-wage job? If so, would you say you worked hard? What was your pay? Were there any benefits?
2. How dependent are well-off people on low-wage workers? What are they dependent on them for? What does the low-wage work done by others allow well-off people to do?
3. How much of a chance do low-wage workers have of enrolling for higher education and working towards a different career? Explain.

2. **The sociological perspective helps us see the opportunities and constraints in our lives.** Sociological thinking leads us to see that in the game of life, society deals the cards. We have a say in how to play the hand, however, and the more we understand the game, the better players we become. Sociology helps us learn more about the world so that we can pursue our goals more effectively.
3. **The sociological perspective empowers us to be active participants in our society.** The more we understand how society works, the more active citizens we become. According to C. Wright Mills (1959), it is the sociological perspective that turns a personal problem (such as being out of work) into a public issue (a lack of good jobs). As we come to see how society affects us, we may support society as it is or we may set out with others to change it.
4. **The sociological perspective helps us live in a diverse world.** The world's population currently stands at around 7.7 billion; with 58 million South Africans, our population does not make up even 1% of the planet's people. As the remaining chapters of this book explain, people from around the world live differently from us. Many people tend to define their way of life as 'right', 'natural' and 'better', and to criticise others who do not live as they do. Conversely, there are others who disparage their society's way of life, and seek to emulate the countries and cultures they think are 'better' than their own. Whatever the case may be, the sociological perspective encourages us to think critically about the relative strengths and weaknesses of all ways of life, irrespective of where they are found.

1.3.3 Careers: The 'sociology advantage'

Most students at colleges and universities today are interested in getting a good job. A background in sociology is excellent preparation for the working world. Of course, completing a bachelor's degree in sociology is the right choice for people who decide they would like to pursue post-graduate studies and eventually become an academic or researcher in this field at a university. However, just as many sociology graduates work as researchers for government agencies or private foundations and businesses, gathering important information on social behaviour and carrying out evaluation research. In today's cost-conscious world, agencies and companies want to be sure that the programmes and policies they set in place get the job done at the lowest cost. Sociologists, especially those with advanced research skills, are in high demand for this kind of work. In addition, a smaller but increasing number of professional sociologists work as clinical sociologists. These women and men work, much as clinical psychologists do, with the goal of improving the lives of troubled clients. A basic difference is that sociologists do not focus on difficulties in the individual's personality, but in their web of social relationships.

However, sociology is not only for people who want to be sociologists. Sociology is often a prescribed course for a range of different degrees at university, including, for example, degrees in medicine and allied fields, engineering, architecture and urban planning, social work, law, criminal justice and so on. There is a very good reason for this. These students will, hopefully, become professionals in their fields. They will almost inevitably be working with all sorts of people in various ways, in different situations and for different reasons. Because sociology helps us to understand that people's location in society shapes their viewpoints and actions, these professionals are in a better position to understand the people with whom they engage on a daily basis. For example, people who work in healthcare – including doctors, nurses and physiotherapists – gain the 'sociological advantage' by learning about patterns of health and illness within the population as well as about how factors such as race, gender and social class affect human well-being. Similarly, people who work in criminal justice – at police stations, magistrates courts and prisons – gain the 'sociology advantage' by learning which categories of people are most at risk of becoming criminals as well as victims, assessing the effectiveness of various policies and programmes for preventing crime, and understanding why people turn to crime in the first place.

Sociology is also excellent preparation for jobs in dozens of additional fields, including advertising, banking, business, trade unions, social movements, education, government, journalism, public relations, human resources and community mobilisation. In almost any type of work, success depends on understanding how various categories of people differ in their beliefs, family patterns and other ways of life. Unless you plan to have a job that never involves dealing with people, you should consider the workplace benefits of learning more about sociology.



How might a sociological perspective help this doctor to understand his patient's account of her symptoms and decide on the best course of treatment?

Source: ESB Professional/Shutterstock.

1.4 The origins of sociology

1.4 Link the origins of sociology to historical social changes.

Almost all discussions on the origins of sociology focus on the emergence of the discipline in Western Europe and its subsequent spread across the globe. This makes sense, to the extent that it was in Western Europe that formal sociology, as a recognised independent discipline taught at universities, was first established. This history of the discipline, however, ignores the important contribution that a North African philosopher, historian and scholar made to the earliest written expression of some of the key ideas and theories that we recognise as sociology today (Ritzer, 2000). Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) was born in Tunis in North Africa, and received a traditional education in the Qur'an, grammar, jurisprudence, philology and poetry (Hozien, n.d.). He took up various political positions throughout his life, spending time in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Spain. At the age of forty-five, when he was based at a far outpost south of Constantine, he began writing his best-known work, *Al-Muqqaddima* (Arabic for 'The Introduction'), in which he presented ideas that prefigure those in disciplines as wide-ranging as economics, history, politics and sociology. *The Introduction* deals with a number of topics, including science, human society, rural and urban civilisations, economic facts, and forms of government and institutions (Hozien, n.d.). Khaldun viewed himself as the founder of a new discipline, *'ilm al-'umran*, which, when

'ilm al-'umran (umran)
the science of society or culture

translated from the Arabic, means ‘the science of culture or of society’: that is, sociology. He argued for a particular way of understanding society and its influence on human behaviour. In summarising his approach, Issawi and Leaman (1998) state that for Khaldun:

“society is an organism that obeys its own inner laws. These laws can be discovered by applying human reason to data either culled from historical records or obtained by direct observation ... These laws are explicable sociologically, and are not a mere reflection of biological impulses or physical factors. To be sure, facts such as climate and food are important, but he attributes greater influence to such purely social factors as cohesion, occupation and wealth.” (Issawi & Leaman, 1998: 625)

This, in sum, is the sociology we know today. Among other contributions to a distinctly sociological approach, Khaldun introduced a typology of rural and urban societies, employed the concept of *asabiyyah* (‘social solidarity’) to analyse human social organisation, presented a theory of cyclical social change, recognised the importance of cause–effect relationships, and advocated for the application of logic and reason to attempts at understanding human life (Soyer & Gilbert, 2012). This fourteenth-century Muslim thinker has therefore rightfully taken his place as the original ‘father’ of sociology.

We now turn to the development of Western sociology. The origins of the discipline are usually traced back to the French social thinker Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who used the term ‘sociology’ in 1838 to describe a new way of thinking about society that was emerging at the time. What distinguished this new way of thinking from the ways that had come before was its **scientific approach** to understanding society. A scientific approach involves “the use of systematic methods of empirical investigation, the analysis of data, theoretical thinking and the logical assessment of arguments to develop a body of knowledge about a particular subject matter” (Giddens, 2006: 78).

1.4.1 Modern society and sociology

Large-scale, rapid and tumultuous changes in the societies of Western Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were important social forces that led to the emergence of sociology as a discipline with a scientific approach that could identify and understand these changes. In short, the changes heralded the emergence of **modern society**. Five kinds of change were especially important: the rise of a factory-based industrial economy, the explosive growth of cities, new ideas about democracy and political rights, the secularisation of knowledge and the expansion of the West.

A new industrial economy

During the Middle Ages, most people in Europe ploughed fields near their homes or worked in small-scale manufacturing (a term derived from Latin words meaning ‘to make by hand’). By the end of the eighteenth century, new sources of energy – the power of moving water and then steam – were used to operate large machines in mills and factories. Instead of labouring at home or in small groups, workers became part of a large and anonymous labour force under the control of strangers who owned the factories. This change in the system of production took people out of their homes, weakening the traditions that had guided community life for centuries.

The growth of cities

Across Europe, landowners took part in what historians call the enclosure movement: they fenced off more and more farmland to create grazing areas for sheep, the source of wool for the thriving textile mills. Without land, countless tenant farmers had little choice but to head to the cities in search of work in the new factories. As cities grew larger, these urban migrants faced many social problems, including pollution, crime and homelessness. Moving through streets crowded with strangers, they experienced a new and impersonal social world.

Political change

Europeans in the Middle Ages viewed society as an expression of God’s will: from royalty to the **serfs**, each person on the social ladder played a part in the holy plan. However, as cities grew, tradition came under attack. In the writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704) and Adam Smith (1723–1790), we see a shift in focus from a moral obligation to God and king to the pursuit of self-interest. In the new political climate, philosophers spoke of personal liberty and individual rights. The French Revolution, which began in 1789, was an even greater break with political and social tradition. It overthrew the monarchy, introduced a republic and eventually brought a liberal democratic government into power. These ideas spread to Western Europe and eventually to other parts of the world.

asabiyyah

social solidarity; group feeling, spirit or bonds shared between people

scientific approach

a means of developing knowledge about the world that rests on empirical methods of data collection, rigorous data analysis, the application of theory and the construction of logical arguments based on evidence

modern society

a society organised as a nation state with an industrial economy, advanced technology, high urbanisation, a rational approach to organising human life and a commitment to progress

serfs

a class of agricultural labourers who were obliged to work the land of the nobles in exchange for using a part of this land for their own sustenance

Cultural change

What historians call the Enlightenment refers to the period around the middle of the eighteenth century in Europe, when scholars and philosophers began to present a secular view of knowledge. Knowledge was no longer seen as the sole preserve of gods, spirits or their representatives on Earth (such as royalty or priests). Because ordinary human beings have the capacity to reason and to think rationally, they can discover and produce knowledge and theories about the world themselves and use it to improve the conditions under which they live. This insight led to the development of and preference for science as a means of gaining knowledge about both the natural and the social worlds.

Expansion of the West

The economic, political and social changes described above created the conditions under which Western European societies were able to expand their influence in the rest of the world. Through various stages of plunder, trade, **colonisation** and **colonialism**, and with various types of relationship established with the peoples they encountered in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia, they searched for land, raw materials, cheap labour and new markets in these regions. Thus began the interconnected global world that we have today, albeit with connections that privilege some countries while disadvantaging many others. Chapter 13 ('Global stratification and development') will explore these issues in some depth.

And so it was that formal sociology was born. The rapid and enormous changes that accompanied the advent of this modern society, together with the idea that humans could develop theories about their lives and the society in which they lived, meant that conditions were ripe for the establishment of the discipline to do just that. Sociology, then, is a child of modernity, and modernity itself is its subject matter (Jones, 2003).

Following the model used by natural sciences such as chemistry and physics, the earliest sociologists were concerned with identifying the 'laws' of human behaviour and using science to identify, test and explain these laws. Today, most sociologists still consider science a crucial part of sociology, but we now realise that human behaviour is far more complex than the movement of planets or even the actions of other living things. We are creatures of imagination and spontaneity, so human behaviour can never be fully explained by any rigid 'laws of society'. Chapter 2 ('Sociological investigation') looks at the different ways in which sociologists approach the study of society.

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, sociology had spread to other parts of the world, including North and South America, Asia and Africa. What of South Africa? What is the history of sociology in South Africa?

1.4.2 South African sociology

Like the choices made by individuals, important historical events rarely just happen. The emergence of sociology in South Africa was itself the result of powerful social forces, and its history is intimately connected to the history of the country as a whole.

Sooryamoorthy (2016) summarises the development of the discipline in three phases.

Sociology in colonial times

The first phase, dubbed 'sociology in colonial times', spans the period 1900 to 1947. While there were some advanced training schools, technical institutes and colleges by the late 1800s, it was only after the Union of South Africa was established in 1910 that the government accorded some of these full university status. None of these institutions offered studies in sociology. Ally, Mooney and Stewart (2003) trace the beginning of the institutionalisation of sociology in South Africa to the publication of *The Report of the Native Economic Commission of the Union of South Africa* in 1932 (Wyndham, 1932). The report highlighted the fact that the rural native reserves were unable to sustain the livelihoods of black Africans, leading to high rates of urbanisation and concomitant urban problems of disease, crime, squatting and overcrowding. The fact that people from different race groups were living and interacting with each other in these squalid conditions was raised as a particular concern. In addition, at the behest of the Dutch Reformed Church and in cooperation with the University of Stellenbosch, the Carnegie Corporation funded research into the problem of poor whites. White poverty, which was especially prevalent among white Afrikaners as they were pushed off the land and into the cities, presented a problem for notions of white superiority and the segregationist policies of the time. Moreover, by the early 1930s, there were strident calls for social workers to be formally trained and supported in social work theory and practice to facilitate their grasp of the social conditions facing their clients (Zaaiman, 2014). All three of these initiatives pointed towards the need for research and teaching in theories and practices for understanding and contributing to a new social order. As a discipline, sociology was well placed to fulfil this role. Thus,

colonisation

the process of settling permanently in a new territory by people who have moved away from their original home territory

colonialism

the policy, practice and process of political control of a territory, country or nation by a foreign territory, country or nation, accompanied by economic and cultural dominance that usually serves the interests of the foreign power

during the course of the 1930s, departments of sociology in combination with departments of social work were established in most of the historically white universities, including the universities of Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Cape Town, the Witwatersrand and Natal (Zaaiman, 2014). The sociology that was taught at both the Afrikaans- and English-medium universities at this time focused on social problems, social welfare and the racial question. Sociology was noticeably absent from the SA Native College at Fort Hare. An institutionalised black sociological tradition would have to wait for the establishment of separate universities for black African, coloured, and Indian/Asian students in the second of the three phases.

Apartheid sociology

The second phase, ‘apartheid sociology’, which ran from 1948 to 1993, saw three important developments. First, sociology established itself as an independent discipline, breaking its ties with the discipline of social work during the course of the 1950s and 1960s. This opened up the opportunity for the discipline to forge an identity that was not service oriented, and to broaden its theoretical perspectives and empirical research into areas that were not necessarily tied to social problems or social welfare.

Second, a split emerged between the sociologies taught at the English- and Afrikaans-medium white universities in the early decades after apartheid was established in 1948. Within the Afrikaans universities (especially the universities of Pretoria, Orange Free State and Potchefstroom), “sophisticated theoretical justifications for apartheid were developed and debates were conducted on how the functioning of apartheid could be optimised” (Zaaiman, 2014: 541). Sociologists at the English-medium universities were less concerned with the broader socio-economic and political order, focusing instead on topics such as the study of demographic patterns and attitudes towards prejudice and elections. To some extent, this split was formalised with the establishment of the Suid-Afrikaanse Sosiologiese Vereniging (SASOV). This professional organisation adopted a whites-only membership clause in 1967, resulting in the withdrawal of English-speaking sociologists and the predominance of the interests and concerns of Afrikaans-speaking academics in the organisation. In 1971, the regional and non-racial Association for Sociology in Southern Africa (ASSA) was established, attracting liberal and critical social scientists to its forums and to publish in its journal. By the 1970s and through the 1980s, the division in sociology was clear: the dominance of conservative, positivist and structural-functional approaches in the pro-apartheid Afrikaans universities, in contrast to liberal, critical and Marxist approaches in the cautiously anti-apartheid English universities (Webster, 2004; Hendricks, 2006; Zaaiman, 2014).

Interwoven with these events, the third development relates to the establishment of black universities in South Africa. In line with the broader apartheid ideology, the Extension of University Education Act, No. 45 of 1959, provided for separate institutions on the basis of race (for example, the University of the Western Cape for coloureds and the University of Durban-Westville for Indians/Asians), and furthermore, on the basis of ethnicity for black Africans (for example, the University of Zululand for Zulus) (Bunting, 2006). Sociology was thus only introduced in the historically black universities in the 1960s (Webster, 2004). As an exercise in academic colonialism (Zaaiman, 2014), young Afrikaner academics were sent to these universities to inculcate apartheid ideas. The objective was for them to produce the civil servants, administrators and professionals required for the bantustan and township schools as well as the hospitals and police force in ‘white’ South Africa. This presented an immense challenge to the black intelligentsia to develop an independent research agenda and teaching strategy. Webster (2004) points out that there were exceptions. For example, at the University of Transkei, under the leadership of Professor Herbert Vilakazi, a Marxist sociology attracted huge numbers of students from across the university.

Democratic sociology

The third phase, ‘democratic sociology’ (1994–2015), marked another shift for sociology, along with the transition to democracy in South Africa. This shift, in a nutshell, signalled an overall weakening of the discipline. By 1993, the rival sociological associations had amalgamated into the South African Sociological Association (SASA), but its membership was smaller than the sum of the two associations that preceded it (Hendricks, 2006). Marxism had, broadly speaking, served as a useful intellectual orientation for understanding and resisting apartheid. However, it was under threat from new perspectives in post-structuralism and post-modernism as well as from the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the early 1990s. The end of apartheid meant that many sociologists lost their links to the civil society organisations that had been forerunners in the fight against it. Understandably, the new democratic government sought policy-oriented research from universities to assist in formulating the practical plans and means to achieve a broader economic and social transformation for society (Webster, 2017). This undermined the continued existence of an abstract and purely theoretical focus for the discipline. In addition, sociologists were drawn into government positions, contributing to a weakening of the discipline. More recently, restructuring at universities has

led to sociologists being scattered across various programmes rather than integrated into dedicated sociology departments, further diluting the identity and focus of the discipline. In the context of a **neo-liberal** push to make universities cost-effective, student numbers have been increased, and academics are pressured to secure funding and produce research publications for subsidies. This has exacerbated the already fairly individualised roles of academics. The racialised nature of sociology, as a legacy of apartheid, means that “in separate, ... extremely unequal institutions, sociology is still practised in entirely different worlds at historically black and historically white universities” (Hendricks, 2006: 93).

What of the future? The potential revitalisation of the discipline rests on a number of interrelated factors. In an increasingly globalised world, the linkages between sociology in South Africa and sociology in the rest of the world need to be developed, especially those with the African continent. Resources for all universities, most especially for those buckling under the slow transformation of the higher education sector, need to be improved. New generations of thinkers, especially black African thinkers, need to be identified and nurtured. The link between academic sociology and both government and civil society is a complex one, but it is a link that needs to be managed if sociology is to contribute to its promise of making the world a better place. Nonetheless, sociology has had, and will continue to have, an important influence on South African society.

There is evidence of this in the past. Sociology was present at the start of apartheid, with the appointment of Dr H.F. Verwoerd to teach sociology at the University of Stellenbosch in 1932 (Zaaiman, 2014). He would later become the architect of apartheid and prime minister of South Africa. Sociology was also present at the demise of apartheid, when an Afrikaner sociologist, Dr Frederick van Zyl Slabbert, met with the African National Congress in Dakar in 1987 to begin talks about dismantling the racist system.

There is also evidence from the present. There are some notable luminaries in the South African political landscape today who have a sociology background of one form or another: Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education and Secretary General of the South African Communist Party; Floyd Shivambu and Mbuyiseni Ndlozi of the Economic Freedom Fighters; and Andile Mngxitama from Black First Land First. The chief executive officer of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Professor Sarah Mosoetsa, holds a PhD in sociology. Dr Sizwe Phakhathi, head of safety at the Chamber of Mines, received his doctorate in sociology from Oxford University after completing his master’s degree at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The evidence from the future is yet to be written; it might well be up to you, the reader of this textbook, to write it.

1.5 Sociological theory

1.5 Summarise sociology’s major theoretical approaches.

The desire to translate observations into understanding brings us to the important aspect of sociology known as theory. A **theory** is a set of linked ideas that explains some aspect of the world. A **sociological theory**, then, attempts to explain some aspect of the social world.

Theories are made up of concepts. A **concept** is an idea expressed in a word. Some concepts refer to concrete, directly observable things, as in, for example, a ‘cup’. ‘Cup’ is a concept because it is a word, and it expresses the idea of an object used for drinking liquids. Other concepts express ideas that are more abstract, but that are no less real. For example, the word ‘exploitation’ is a concept that expresses the idea of using someone’s work or effort unfairly, in ways that benefit you more than that person. While we cannot observe exploitation itself directly, as we can a cup, it still exists and is real.

There is a wide range of sociological theories, from those that attempt to explain whole societies, to those that focus on some specific aspect or phenomenon in society, and still others that zero in on individual actions and social interactions. Sociological theories are based on **evidence**, which is data about the social world that sociologists have gathered through observation of that world. As the next chapter (‘Sociological investigation’) shows, there are various research methods that sociologists use to obtain this data. It may be numeric, in the form of numbers, or textual, in the form of words, pictures or maps. Sociologists analyse the data, looking for patterns and themes, and develop concepts and theories that explain these patterns and themes. Let us consider how this might work with smoking as an example.

Map of South Africa 1.1 shows the percentage of men and women who smoke cigarettes for each of the nine provinces in South Africa. What patterns do you see? First, more men than women smoke, and this is the case for all provinces. Second, the incidence of smoking, for both men and women, is highest in the Western Cape and the Northern Cape. The lowest rates are in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. What tentative concepts and/or theories come to mind from this analysis? Obviously, as soon as we see differences for men and women, we must think about how gender and its associated concepts, such as gender roles, gender inequality, and gendered norms

neo-
from the Greek meaning ‘new’; when added to the name of an existing theory, process or practice, this prefix indicates that the basic principles and ideas of the original are retained, but applied in new ways to suit new or changed conditions, thereby retaining the significance, effect and value of the original

theory
set of linked concepts that explains some aspect of the world

sociological theory
set of linked concepts that explains some aspect of the social world

concept
a mental construct or idea about some aspect of the world that is expressed in a word

evidence
data about and from the world that supports an argument or theory

and expectations, might assist us in explaining the differences. Next, we know that KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo are two of the poorest provinces in South Africa and the Western Cape is one of the richest. Does smoking prevalence therefore have something to do with economic standing and class? The Northern Cape is something of a conundrum until we compare data across the racial categories in South Africa, and establish that smoking rates are highest for both coloured men and women (Statistics South Africa, 2017b). Knowing that over 40% of the coloured population of South Africa resides in the Northern Cape (Statistics South Africa, 2012), we can begin to formulate a tentative theory that explains the statistics on smoking there.

Seeing ourselves



Map of South Africa 1.1: Rates of cigarette smoking across South Africa, 2016

This map shows the percentage of men and women who smoke cigarettes in each of the nine provinces of South Africa. Look for patterns. More men than women smoke. The prevalence of smoking is highest in the Western Cape and Northern Cape, and lowest in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. What sociological concepts could help us to develop a theory to explain these differences?

Source: Created by author Hagemeyer from data in Statistics South Africa, 2017b: 36.

quantitative data

data in the form of numbers; often gleaned from surveys of large numbers of people

qualitative data

data in the form of words, pictures and diagrams; often gleaned from face-to-face interviews and participant observation

It is important to note that this **quantitative data** on smoking helps us to identify important social factors that play a role in smoking. However, **qualitative data** provides us with an in-depth 'feel' of how people experience and understand their social world, often in their own words. This can give us important insights into social life from their perspective, from which we can develop grounded concepts and theories. Consider the transcript that follows from an interview with a young woman about smoking. What themes can you identify that might help us to understand why she smokes?

Interview transcript

Date: 13 January 2019

Details of interviewee: Stephline, female, twenty-three years old, coloured, administrative assistant, originally from Upington, now resident in Pretoria

Place of interview: At home in Pretoria

Interviewer: When and why did you decide to start smoking cigarettes?

Interviewee: I guess I was about sixteen or seventeen. I don't know that I ever decided. I mean, I grew up with smoking. As far back as I can remember, my family smoked. And I mean all of them. Mother, father, *ouma* (grandmother), *oupa* (grandfather), aunties, uncles, cousins ... so, smoking was a thing that you just did in my family. And we weren't alone. Most of our neighbours smoked too. Except the little kids, of course. I remember we would have big fat parties on the weekends. The neighbours would each get a turn, you know, to host a weekend party? We'd cook food and drink and smoke and play music and dance, and just, have a *jol* (a good time, party, fun). Then, when you were old enough, your boyfriend or girlfriend could come to the parties as well.

Interviewer: Did you have a boyfriend who came to these parties?

Interviewee: *Ja, of course, hoe dan anders?* (Yes, of course, it couldn't be anything else, could it?).

Interviewer: Did your boyfriend smoke?

Interviewee: *Beslis* (definitely). It would be kind of odd if he didn't, you know? The guys – my father, uncles, men from the neighbourhood – would have thought him weird if he didn't smoke. That reminds me, this one cousin of mine, though, she didn't smoke, not even when she was like twenty-one years old or so, and out of school. Everyone thought she was *anders* (different, otherwise), *eienaardig* (odd), funny, peculiar, you know? What? Did she think she was better than everyone else? A princess? I mean really, she was always talking about how it was bad for you and made you look bad and stupid. And so unladylike! [Makes dismissive gesture with hand]. Who did she think she was?

Interviewer: Well, what do you think? Who did she think she was?

Interviewee: I don't know, today she's an attorney in Johannesburg. So she made good. She's got a good life. But now she's got money and she's all independent and her own woman and stuff. Now she smokes! [Giggles]. *So snaaks* (so funny).

Data from interviews gives us an insight into the perceptions, reflections and experiences of people in their own words. The sociologist's task is to identify the concepts that are helpful to explain these and other experiences, and to develop a general theory of a social phenomenon (in this case, smoking). As we can see from this interview, concepts such as peer pressure, family socialisation, gender and class are good starting points for developing a theory on smoking prevalence.

Source: Created by author Hagemeyer.

In developing their theories based on the data from their research, sociologists may use one or more theoretical approaches as 'road maps.' Think of a **theoretical approach** as a basic image of society that guides thinking and research. Sociologists make use of three major theoretical approaches: the structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approach and the symbolic-interaction approach. In addition, an increasing number of sociologists working in the **Global South**, of which South Africa is a part, are working from a decolonial theory perspective.

1.5.1 The structural-functional approach

The **structural-functional approach** is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. As its name suggests, this approach points to social structure, those regular, patterned aspects of the social world that give shape to our lives: in families, the workplace, the classroom, the community and so on. This approach also looks for the **social functions** of the social structure, the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole. All aspects of social structure, from a simple handshake to complex religious rituals, function to keep society going, at least in its present form.

The structural-functional approach owes much to Auguste Comte, who pointed out the need to keep society unified at a time when many traditions were breaking down. Emile Durkheim, of whom we spoke earlier, also based his work on this approach. A third structural-functional pioneer was the English sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). Spencer compared society to the human body. Just as the structural parts of the human body – the skeleton, muscles and various internal organs – function interdependently to help the entire organism survive, social structures work together to preserve society. The structural-functional approach, then, leads sociologists to identify various structures of society and investigate their functions.

Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) expanded our understanding of the concept of social function by pointing out that any social structure probably has many functions, some more obvious than others. He distinguished between **manifest functions**, the recognised and intended consequences of any social pattern, and **latent functions**, the unrecognised and unintended consequences of any social pattern. For example, the manifest function of the South African system of higher education is to provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to perform jobs after graduation. Perhaps just as important, although less often acknowledged, is university's latent function as a 'marriage broker', bringing together young people of similar social backgrounds. Another latent function of higher education is to limit unemployment by keeping thousands of young people out of the labour market, where many of them might not easily find jobs.

However, Merton also recognised that not all the effects of social structures are good. Thus, a **social dysfunction** is any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society. Globalisation of the economy may be good for some companies, for example, but it can also cost workers their jobs as production moves overseas. Therefore, whether specific social patterns are helpful or harmful for society is a matter about which people often disagree. In addition, what is functional for one category of people (say, high profits for bank executives) may well be dysfunctional for other categories of people (workers who lose pension funds invested in banks that fail or people who cannot pay their mortgages and end up losing their homes).

theoretical approach

a basic image of society that guides thinking and research

Global South

collectively the countries in Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia and Oceania that have a colonial history and are economically, politically, culturally and socially subordinated in the global distribution of power and influence

structural-functional approach

a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability

social function

the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole

manifest function

the recognised and intended consequences of any social pattern

latent function

the unrecognised and unintended consequence of a social pattern

social dysfunction

any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society



What functions do you think the media serve in society? Are there any social dysfunctions to the widespread use of the media in our daily lives?

Source: Sources: vectorfusionart/Shutterstock; Lasse Kristensen/Shutterstock; jocic/Shutterstock; giftzaa5069/Shutterstock.

In the mid-1900s, most sociologists favoured the structural-functional approach. In recent decades, however, its influence has declined. By focusing on social stability and unity, critics point out, structural functionalism ignores inequalities of social class, race and gender that cause tension and conflict. In general, its focus on stability at the expense of conflict makes this approach somewhat conservative. As a critical response, sociologists developed the social-conflict approach.

1.5.2 The social-conflict approach

social-conflict approach

a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change

The **social-conflict approach** is a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change. Unlike the structural-functional emphasis on solidarity and stability, this approach highlights inequality and change. Guided by this approach, sociologists investigate how factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and age are linked to a society's unequal distribution of money, power, education and social prestige. A conflict analysis rejects the idea that social structure promotes the operation of society as a whole, focusing instead on how social patterns benefit some people while hurting others. Sociologists using the social-conflict approach look at ongoing conflict between dominant and disadvantaged categories of people: the rich in relation to the poor, white people in relation to black people, and men in relation to women. Typically, the people on top try to protect their privileges, while the disadvantaged try to gain more for themselves.

Class analysis

class analysis

the study of society that focuses on inequality and conflict among people of different socio-economic categories

One fundamental basis of inequality and division in most societies is that they are based on class. Theorists who engage in **class analysis** therefore focus on identifying and explaining the ways in which our economic class position shapes our social biographies. In addition, they attempt to show how the social structure, in all its various forms, is organised to perpetuate class inequality and maintain the advantages that it provides for the better-off classes. A class analysis of the educational system, for example, shows how schooling carries class inequality from one generation to the next (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1985; Brunello & Checchi, 2007; Kohli, 2014).

In South Africa, inequalities in education are so stark that theorists often talk about the country as having two systems of education. This is partly a legacy of apartheid policies, which favoured white schools over those designated for other racial groups. The post-apartheid government therefore inherited an extremely unequal system; despite the high levels of funding and resources that have been allocated to education, this inequality continues, increasingly taking on a class dimension. As one theorist puts it:

“we have two schooling systems. A minority of students (about 25%) who come from wealthy backgrounds of all races attend high quality primary and secondary schools and go on to study at University or other institutions of higher learning. Consequently these students gain access to the top end of the labour market where they earn high incomes in high productivity jobs. The second

schooling system consists of the majority of students (75%) who come from poorer backgrounds, attend low quality primary and secondary schools and have very little chance of accessing higher education opportunities due to the low quality of their education. Most of these students move directly into the labour-market either with no matric qualification or a low-quality matric pass. These students will either fill the ranks of the unemployed, the informal sector, or become part of the second-tier labour-market which offers low productivity jobs and low incomes. These jobs are often manual labour or low skill jobs which pay the minimum wage. Due to the stratified nature of South African society, parents who are in the top end of the labour market will send their children to good schools, while those in the bottom end of the labour market will send their children to the dysfunctional part of the education system; the very system that they came through decades earlier. This cycle of inequality perpetuates the current patterns of poverty and privilege.” (Spaull, 2012)

Many sociologists use the social-conflict approach to bring about societal change to reduce inequality as well as to understand society. Karl Marx, whose ideas are discussed at length in Chapter 4 (‘Society’), championed the cause of the workers in what he saw as their battle against factory owners. In a well-known statement (inscribed on his monument in London’s Highgate Cemetery), Marx asserted, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”

Gender analysis

Societies are not just divided by class. Scholars working from a **gender analysis** perspective study how inequality and conflict between women and men manifest in society in various ways. Gender analysis is allied to feminism, which is a theory of and an activism for social equality for women and men. The importance of being cognisant of gender lies in making us aware of the many ways in which the social structure and our way of life place men in positions of power over women: in the home (where men are usually considered ‘head of the household’), in the workplace (where men earn more income and hold most positions of power and prestige), in politics (where men are more likely to take on political leadership positions), in the mass media and entertainment industry (where, for instance, more men than women can demand high-profile and more lucrative film roles) and in civil society (where women take on more of the burdens of caring for the elderly and sick, and play more roles in religious, community and charity organisations).

Another contribution of feminist theory is making us aware of the importance of women to the development of sociology. All the most widely recognised pioneers of the discipline were men. This is because in the nineteenth century, it was all but unheard of for women to be in academia, and few women took central roles in public life. Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) is regarded as the first woman sociologist. Born to a wealthy English family, Martineau made her mark in 1853 by translating the writings of Auguste Comte from French into English. In her own published writings, she documented the evils of slavery and argued for laws to protect factory workers, defending workers’ right to unionise. She was particularly concerned about the position of women in society and fought for changes in education policy so that women could have more options in life than marriage and raising children.

South Africa has had a number of prominent women sociologists who have made important contributions to the society and to the development of the discipline. In the ‘Thinking about diversity’ box that follows, we focus on Fatima Meer, one of these sociologists.

gender analysis

the study of society that focuses on inequality and conflict between men and women

Thinking about diversity

Fatima Meer: A pioneer in South African sociology

Fatima Meer, born in Durban in 1928, became one of South Africa’s best-known anti-apartheid and human rights activists and authors.

Her earliest socialisation into a life of activism can be traced back to her father, who was the editor of a newspaper with a predominantly Indian readership that expressed strong views against British colonialism in India and the ruling white nationalist government in South Africa.

As early as high school, Meer was involved in resistance activities against the apartheid state. She attended the universities of the Witwatersrand and Natal, where she earned her master’s degree in sociology.

She was the first woman to be banned under the apartheid government for her roles in organising and speaking out in the protests that formed part of the 1952 Defiance



Fatima Meer

Source: Gisele Wulfsohn/South Photographs/Gallo Images.

Campaign. Despite the three-year ban that restricted both her movement and writing, it was during this time that she co-founded the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) in 1954. It was this federation that organised the iconic women's march to the Union Buildings in 1956 to protest against the application of apartheid's pass laws to women. In 1956, she made history again when she was appointed as lecturer of sociology at her alma mater in Natal, becoming the first 'non-white' woman to teach at a South African university reserved for white students. She was a staff member there until 1988.

She was a presence of resistance at almost all South Africa's most well-known apartheid atrocities, speaking out in protest, providing material support and comfort, holding vigils and participating in marches and boycotts, including at the Treason Trial, the Sharpeville Massacre, the Soweto uprising and unrest in the townships in the 1980s. She was banned, detained and imprisoned as a result, and she survived assassination attempts by the apartheid state on numerous occasions.

Meer's unwavering commitment to uplifting the oppressed in society – the poor of all races, women and children – led her to play a central role in establishing a college, a craft centre, a high school, a training centre, various lobby groups and organisations, an environment group and an institute for research, all with the express purpose of improving the lives of oppressed people and advocating for their rights as equal citizens. In 1994, she declined a seat in the now democratic Parliament, preferring to continue her work on the ground with civil society organisations and ordinary people.

As an academic and writer, Meer had an international reputation. She had a hand in over forty books, as writer and publisher. She presented at local and overseas conferences, and spoke out fearlessly against apartheid and other forms of injustice in her papers.

One of her most famous books is *The Trial of Andrew Zondo: A Sociological Insight*, in which she presents a sociological analysis of the society and social conditions that led this member of *Umkhonto weSizwe*, the armed wing of the African National Congress, to plant a bomb in a shopping centre in Amanzimtoti in 1985. Using transcripts from the trial, she points to the racial and class inequalities engendered by apartheid, absolute poverty, appalling conditions in black African townships, poor schooling, family dislocation and demoralisation as key factors in explaining his actions.

Fatima Meer died in 2010 at the age of eighty-one and is buried in Durban.

Sources: South African History Online, n.d.; Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.

What do you think?

1. If she were alive today, what do you think Fatima Meer would say about class, race and gender inequality in present-day South Africa?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the forms of protest against injustice in South Africa today and those undertaken during apartheid?
3. Should sociologists be involved in drawing attention to the plight of the oppressed in South Africa today?

All the chapters of this book consider the importance of gender and gender inequality. For an in-depth look at feminism and the social standing of women and men, see Chapter 14 ('Gender stratification').

Race analysis

race analysis

the study of society that focuses on inequality and conflict among people of different racial and ethnic categories

Given South Africa's history of segregation, colonialism and apartheid, the importance of **race analysis** – the study of society that focuses on inequality and conflict among people of different racial and ethnic categories – cannot be overestimated. Just as men have power over women, white people on average have numerous social advantages over black people, including higher incomes, more schooling, better health and longer life expectancy. Sociologists who study race do so from a number of different angles, which, taken together, show how race manifests and shapes the structure of society as well as the lived experiences of individuals and groups. One focus on race looks at the concept itself: its origins, history, definition and usage. Another analyses the economic dimensions of race, drawing our attention to how it was (and is) understood for slavery and the colonial policy, how it is the foundation for economic exploitation and advantage, and how it is intimately linked to class and the allocation of resources. A further area of study explores the political aspects of race, and can be summarised as a concern with understanding the link between power and race: who has power, who does not, and what power can be garnered to afford rights and privileges to various race groups in society. Finally, sociologists who are interested in culture emphasise the ways in which the meanings and experiences of race shape identity formation, and how this is mediated through the media, art, literature, value systems and everyday social practices. See Chapter 15, 'Race and ethnicity', for an in-depth discussion of these and other issues.

The various social-conflict theories have gained a large following in recent decades, but like other approaches, they have also met with criticism. Because any social-conflict theory focuses on inequality, it largely ignores how shared values and interdependence unify members of a society. In addition, say critics, to the extent that it pursues political goals, a social-conflict approach cannot claim scientific objectivity. Supporters of social-conflict theory respond that all theoretical approaches have political consequences.

A final criticism of both the structural-functional approach and the social-conflict approach is that they paint society in broad strokes: in terms of ‘family’, ‘social class’, ‘**race**’ and so on. A third type of theoretical analysis – the symbolic-interaction approach – views society less in general terms and more as the everyday experiences of individual people.

1.5.3 The symbolic-interaction approach

The structural-functional approach and the social-conflict approach share a **macro-level orientation**, a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole. Macro-level sociology takes in the big picture, rather like observing a city from high above in a helicopter and seeing how highways help people move from place to place or how housing differs from rich to poor neighbourhoods. Sociology also uses a **micro-level orientation**, a close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations. Exploring urban life in this way occurs at street level, where you might watch how children invent games on a school playground or how pedestrians respond to homeless people they pass on the street. The **symbolic-interaction approach**, then, is a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals.

How does ‘society’ result from the ongoing experiences of tens of millions of people? One answer, explained in Chapter 6 (‘Social interaction in everyday life’), is that society is nothing more than the shared reality that people construct for themselves as they interact with one another. Human beings live in a world of symbols, attaching meaning to virtually everything, from the words on a page to the wink of an eye. We create ‘reality’, therefore, as we define our surroundings, we decide what we think of others and shape our own identities.

The symbolic-interaction approach has roots in the thinking of Max Weber (1864–1920), a German sociologist who emphasised the need to understand a setting from the point of view of the people in it. Weber’s approach is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 (‘Society’).

Since Weber’s time, sociologists have taken micro-level sociology in a number of directions. Chapter 5 (‘Socialisation’) discusses the ideas of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who explored how our personalities develop as a result of social experience. The dramaturgical analysis proposed by Erving Goffman (1922–1982) describes how we resemble actors on a stage as we play our various roles. Other contemporary sociologists, including George Homans and Peter Blau, have developed social-exchange analysis. In their view, social interaction is guided by what each person stands to gain or lose from the interaction. In the ritual of courtship, for example, people seek mates who offer at least as much – in terms of physical attractiveness, intelligence and social background – as they offer in return.

Without denying the existence of macro-level social structures such as the family and social class, the symbolic-interaction approach reminds us that society basically amounts to people interacting. That is, micro-level sociology tries to show how individuals actually experience society. However, on the other side of the coin, by focusing on what is unique in each social scene, this approach risks overlooking the widespread influence of culture as well as factors such as class, gender and race.

1.5.4 The decolonial theory approach

A more recent theoretical approach, and one which is of critical importance for our context, is **decolonial theory**. Over the last two decades or so, Latin American theorists such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter D’Mignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel, and African scholars such as Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, have theorised about the structural conditions and lived experiences of the societies and peoples who are at the margins of the global world order.

In order to understand this approach, we need to distinguish **decolonisation** from **decoloniality**. Decolonisation refers to the process by which countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia (collectively termed the ‘Global South’) achieved political independence from their former colonisers in Western Europe. What this process did not achieve, however, is decoloniality (in other words, an independence from the economic, political, cultural, social and personal structures that were put in place by colonialism). The legacies of colonialism remain for these independent states, “from how capitalist economies are reproduced, to how authoritarian politics are conducted, to how cultural preferences [for food, hairstyles, music, artistic works] are exercised ...” (Jansen, 2017: 157). Aníbal Quijano (2007) captures these legacies in the concept of **coloniality**, and asserts that this is what remains even after formal colonialism has ended. This coloniality, in all its various forms, explains much about the world we live in today, from how and why some countries are richer than others, to how and why people came to be classified variously as ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘men’, ‘women’, ‘civilised’, ‘not civilised’ and so on. There are three forms of coloniality that operate in the world today.

In the first instance, there is **coloniality of power**. This refers to the asymmetrical, unequal power relationships that exist today between the **Global North** and the Global South, and that benefit the former. The modernity of the former colonisers, and the progress, development and enrichment that came with it, was enabled by the slave trade, colonialism, apartheid, neo-liberalism and now

‘race’

a socially constructed category of people who share biologically transmitted traits that members of a society consider significant; it is important to remember that there is a tension between reinscribing the idea of ‘race’ and acknowledging the inequalities for which it stands

macro-level orientation

a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole

micro-level orientation

a close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations

symbolic-interaction approach

a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals

decolonial theory

a theory that attempts to bring a critical awareness of the logic of coloniality (in all its forms), provide a critique of coloniality, resist expressions of coloniality and take action to overcome coloniality

decolonisation

in general terms, the formal process by which countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia achieved political independence from their former colonisers in Western Europe; in terms of decolonial theory, the process by which these countries (collectively termed the ‘Global South’) delink from connection to and dependence on former colonisers even after formal decolonisation

decoloniality

independence from the economic, political, cultural, social and personal structures that were put in place by colonialism

coloniality

structured political, economic, social, cultural and interpersonal legacies of colonialism that continue to shape the formerly colonised countries and the global order as a whole in the present, favouring the Global North at the expense of the Global South

coloniality of power

structured inequalities in economic and political power relationships between the Global North and South

Global North

wealthy countries in North America and Western Europe, and parts of Asia and Oceania, that have the power to dominate global economic, political, cultural and social relationships

globalisation to which the colonies were subject, and which impoverished and underdeveloped them (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 11). Simply put, economic production, the international division of labour, trade and consumption of goods and services under global capitalism, allows for extensive capital accumulation and wealth for countries in the northern hemisphere, while African and other countries in the southern hemisphere are exploited.

Second, there is **coloniality of knowledge**, which describes the dominance of perspectives and theories emanating from the Global North. How we understand the world – our theories and concepts – and how we judge what constitutes valid, legitimate knowledge have been determined by the analyses and standards of Northern thinkers, scholars and practitioners (Mignolo, 2002, 2013). This means that indigenous and endogenous (to the Global South) knowledges are discounted as superstition, magic and folklore, resulting in Africa and other countries being “saddled with irrelevant knowledge that disempowers rather than empowers individuals and communities” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 11).

Third, there is **coloniality of being**. Colonialism relied heavily on a particular socially constructed classification of **human subjectivities**, first and foremost, into those who are civilised and those who are uncivilised. This classification justified the actions of enslavement, dispossession, exploitation and repression of the uncivilised (colonised peoples) by the civilised (the colonisers). In addition, human beings were (and continue to be) categorised in a binary fashion into white/black, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, owner/slave, Christian/not Christian, modern/traditional, developed/undeveloped and so on. These categorisations are hierarchical: for each category, the one is more privileged and valued than its opposite (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). This has important consequences for the ways in which resources are allocated in society, with certain categories of people in these hierarchies better off than others. In addition, people’s daily lived experiences are very different, depending on their relative positions of privilege and disadvantage in the hierarchies.

Given these dimensions of coloniality, the task of decolonial theory is to “dismantl[e] relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world” (Maldonado-Torres, 2011: 1). To put this more straightforwardly, decolonial theorists attempt to bring a critical awareness of the logic of coloniality (in all its forms), provide a critique of coloniality, resist expressions of coloniality and take action to overcome coloniality.

Table 1.1 summarises the main characteristics of sociology’s major theoretical approaches. Each of these approaches is helpful in answering particular kinds of questions about society. However, the fullest understanding of our social world comes from using all of them, as you can see in the analysis of sports in South Africa that follows.

Table 1.1: Sociology’s major theoretical approaches

	Structural-functional approach	Social-conflict approaches (class, gender and race analysis)	Symbolic-interaction approach	Decolonial approach
What is the level of analysis?	Macro	Macro	Micro	Macro
What image of society does the approach have?	Society is a system of interrelated parts that is relatively stable. Each part works to keep society operating in an orderly way. Members generally agree about what is morally right and morally wrong.	Society is a system of social inequalities based on class, gender and race. Society operates to benefit some categories of people and harm others. Social inequality causes conflict that leads to social change.	Society is an ongoing process. People interact in countless settings using symbolic communications. The reality people experience is variable and changing.	Society is characterised by coloniality. In all its forms – power, knowledge and being – it operates to advantage the Global North and disadvantage the Global South.
What core questions does the approach ask?	How is society held together? What are the major parts of society? How are these parts linked? What does each part do to help society function?	How does society divide a population? How do advantaged people protect their privileges? How do disadvantaged people seeking change challenge the system?	How do people experience society? How do people shape the reality they experience? How do behaviour and meaning change from person to person and from one situation to another?	How does coloniality manifest itself? How does it disadvantage the structures, processes and lived experiences of people in the Global South? How can history and analysis be rewritten to decolonise them?

coloniality of knowledge
the dominance of theoretical knowledge and policy ideas that come from the Global North over those from the Global South

coloniality of being
the colonial legacy of categorising human beings into various hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and age, among others

human subjectivities
the understanding of who we are as human beings, our ideas about who and what other people are, and the terms used to describe them

1.6 Applying the approaches: The sociology of sport

1.6 Apply sociology's major theoretical approaches to the topic of sport.

Who does not enjoy sport? Children as young as six or seven take part in organised sport and many teens become skilled at three or more sports. Weekend television is filled with sporting events for viewers of all ages, and whole sections of our newspapers are devoted to teams, players and scores. In South Africa, top players such as Anele Ngcongca (soccer), Siya Kolisi (rugby), Kagiso Rabada (cricket), Wayde van Niekerk (athletics) and Ernie Els (golf) are among our most famous celebrities. Sport in South Africa and around the world is a multi-billion-dollar industry. What can we learn by applying sociology's major theoretical approaches to this familiar part of everyday life?

1.6.1 The functions of sport

A structural-functional approach directs our attention to the ways in which sport helps society operate. The manifest functions of sport include providing recreation as well as offering a means of getting in physical shape and a relatively harmless way to let off steam. Sport has important latent functions as well, which include building social relationships and also creating tens of thousands of jobs across the country. Participating in sport encourages competition and the pursuit of success, both of which are values that are central to our society's way of life.

Sport also has dysfunctional consequences. For example, universities try to field winning teams to build their reputations, and also to raise money from alumni and corporate sponsors. In the process, however, these universities sometimes recruit students for their athletic skill rather than their academic ability. This practice not only lowers the academic standards of the university, but also shortchanges athletes, who spend little time doing the academic work that will prepare them for later careers. The intense competition in sport may motivate people to perform, but it also encourages various types of cheating, including the use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs, and may subject athletes to long-term health risks (Upthegrove, Roscigno & Charles, 1999; Borden, Gröndahl & Ward, 2017).

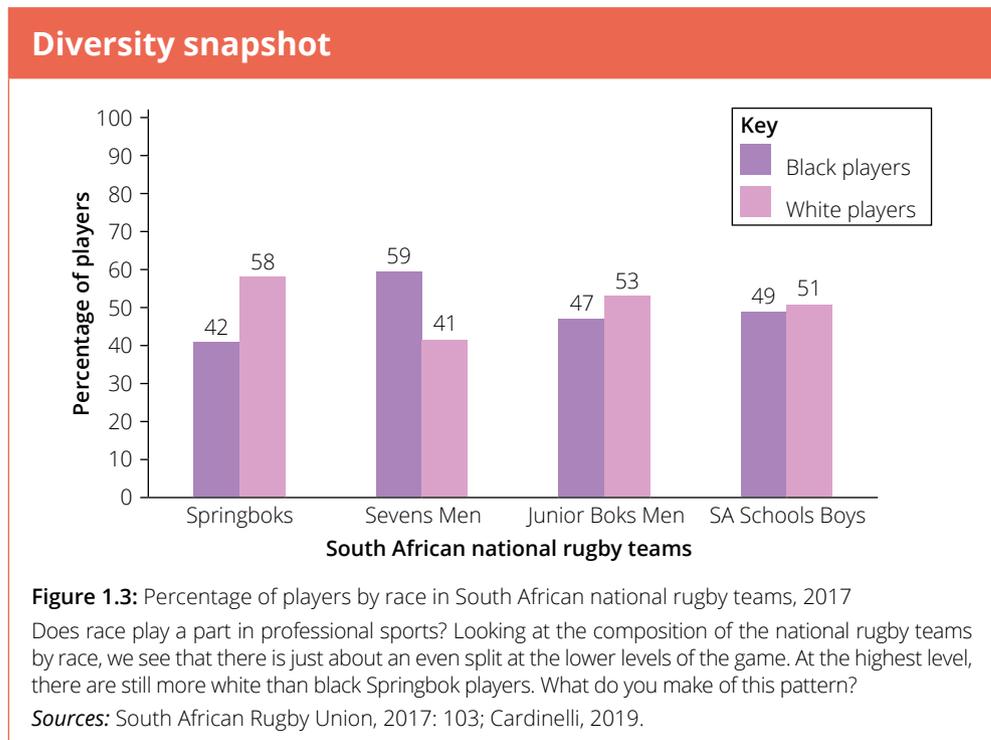
1.6.2 Sport and conflict

A class analysis of sport points out that the games people play reflect their socio-economic standing. Some sports – including tennis, swimming, golf and cricket – are expensive, so taking part is largely limited to the well-to-do. Soccer, netball and athletics, however, are accessible to people at almost all income levels. Thus, the games people play are not simply a matter of individual choice, but also a reflection of their social standing.

Using a gender analysis, we notice that throughout history, men have dominated the world of sport. In the nineteenth century, women had little opportunity to engage in athletic competition, and those who did received little attention (Shaulis, 1999; Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). For example, the first modern Olympic Games, held in 1896, barred women from competition. The 2016 Olympics, by contrast, included women competing in twenty-eight sports, although the teams from most countries had more male than female participants. Society's dominant gender ideology about appropriate masculine and feminine pursuits shapes how various sports are viewed and how athletes who participate are expected to behave. Contact sports, such as boxing and rugby, which require physical strength and controlled aggression against opponents, are traditionally seen as appropriate for men (Serra, 2015). So are sports that require mastery over complex equipment or high-speed engines, including sailing and motor racing. Women risk being seen to 'lose' their femininity if they participate. Women's sport suffers from a lack of funding – including national development monies and corporate sponsorships – and a lack of media coverage (Serra, 2015). This makes it difficult for the sports to develop and attract more participants and fans (Bauer, 2012). For example, netball in South Africa is second only to soccer in terms of active participants and followers. This traditional women's sport boasts over a million adult players and 1.5 million school players (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2012). Despite this reach, it only has a semi-professional league, lacks a comprehensive sponsor and gets little television coverage. Players thus have to fund themselves (Jeewa, 2017), and because so many are unable to do so, the sport regularly loses talented players. Even in sports where both men and women participate, the women's version often has less prestige in society. While there is a national women's soccer team in South Africa, which attracts government funding and limited sponsorship, a professional women's soccer league was only launched in August 2019 (Mamabolo, 2018; Mokwena, 2019).

Race also figures in sport. The most obvious way is when we evaluate athletic potential and prowess in terms of race (Serra, 2015), so that, for example, phrases such as 'white men can't jump'

or ‘black people can’t swim’ are vaunted to explain lack of participation or success in sports such as basketball and swimming. In South Africa, the history of sport has been fundamentally shaped by racial inequalities, from the earliest days of colonialism, through apartheid and into the democratic era. British colonialists brought sports such as cricket, soccer and rugby with them, but given the racist ideas and practices of the time, participation was often reserved for whites. Racial division in sport was legislated during apartheid, resulting in racially exclusive teams, codes, associations, leagues and matches (Serra, 2015). A famous case of racial discrimination occurred when the apartheid government refused to permit South African-born Basil d’Oliveira (who was classified coloured) to play in a cricket test series for England in South Africa in 1968 (Wisden, 2018). Another was the 1970 New Zealand rugby union tour, which took place in South Africa only because the apartheid authorities gave Maori players the status of ‘honorary whites’ (Brown, 2010). By the mid-1980s, most sporting codes had barred South African sport from international competition due to its racist policies. In the democratic era, sport has been used as a tool for addressing race-based disadvantage stemming from the apartheid era (Serra, 2015). Affirmative action in sport, through racial quotas to achieve representative teams, has been controversial. On the one hand, supporters argue that without such quotas, racial redress would not happen, or at least it would happen very slowly. On the other hand, critics bemoan the fact that racial quotas undermine merit as the basis for team selection and contribute to lacklustre performances. These in turn scupper sponsorship and funding, and lead to the overall decline of the sport. Yet transformation is required at all levels, from players and athletes to coaches, administrators and access to adequate facilities. This has been a slow and uneven process, with some sports being more successful than others. South African rugby is a case in point. In 2014, twenty years after democracy, rugby’s governing body, the South African Rugby Union (SARU), put forward a Strategic Transformation Plan that stipulated a minimum of 50% of black (which includes black African, coloured and Indian/Asian) players to be fielded in national team games by 2019. Figure 1.3 shows that while progress has been made at the lower levels of the game, much is still to be done for its premier team, the Springboks, to achieve this target.



1.6.3 Sport as symbolic interaction

At the micro level, a sporting event is a complex, face-to-face interaction. In part, play is guided by the rules of the game and each player’s assigned positions. Some games, such as rugby, define controlled aggression and violence against opponents as acceptable; some games, such as tennis, do not.

However, players are also spontaneous and unpredictable. Following the symbolic-interaction approach, we see sport less as a system and more as an ongoing process. From this point of view, too, we expect each player to understand the game a little differently. Some players enjoy a

setting of stiff competition; for others, love of the game may be greater than the need to win. In addition, the behaviour of any single player may change over time. A cricketer making his debut in a test match may, for example, feel self-conscious during the game, but go on to develop a comfortable sense of fitting in with the team. In addition, the social interactions between him and his team mates and coaches will also change as his role and performance are cemented in the team. An example of the symbolic-interactionist approach to sports is provided by Clark and Burnett (2010), who studied the reciprocal socialisation that takes place in families of South African girls who participate in soccer. In the first instance, families socialise girls into expected gender roles in the arena of sport through patriarchal values, play activities in childhood and the role modelling of family members' involvement in sport. In turn, the girls resocialise the family through their participation in soccer, a traditional male sport, and impact on the interactions of family members and their views on women's football in general.

1.6.4 Decolonising sport

The authors of a recent collection of essays (Cleophas, 2018) tackle themes as diverse as a history of the Cape Province Mountain Club, athletics in Cape Town in the early twentieth century, Muslim women and sport, non-racial football in South Africa in the 1970s, and personal stories and reflections from ordinary people involved in a variety of sports that have, until now, been untold and unheard. The editor, Francois Cleophas, states clearly that the volume is a conscious effort at decoloniality. Quoting Chilisa (in Cleophas, 2018: 9), he argues that decolonising the history of sport in the Global South requires, first, recognising how the standard historical accounts of various sports are “wrongly written”. Once this is achieved, he says, we need to show how the life experiences and contributions of certain categories of participants to various sports have historically been distorted, undermined or erased. Finally, then, the focus must shift to “retelling the stories of the past and envisioning the future” (Chilisa, in Cleophas, 2018: 9). In short, decolonial theorists have two key objectives when considering sport in the former colonies, including South Africa. On the one hand, they explain how the narrative of the sport's history is biased towards a white male sport tradition. On the other hand, they bring to light a full-scale reimagining and rewriting of these sport histories from the perspective and experiences of colonised peoples, especially those who are/were black and female. In ‘Reflections on writing a post-colonial history of a colonial game’ from the same volume, Odendaal (2018) describes what such a decolonial account entails for a history of cricket in South Africa:

- Understanding the origins of the game in South Africa as fundamentally located in the context of British colonial conquest and war, and not as an innocent pastime that was above politics played by English gentlemen
- Integrating the experiences of black players and women players into its history, and recounting the ways in which they pioneered aspects of the game, supported the traditions and culture of the game, and also subverted them
- Revealing and weaving together the organisational features of the eleven national bodies – separated variously by race, class, region, gender and religion – that have existed over the course of cricket's history, and showing the overlap and discontinuities between them
- Recompiling the statistical records of the game to show the extent of and involvement of those whose performances and participation were made invisible during colonialism and apartheid
- Moving beyond a master narrative that underpins the standard accepted history of the game, which privileges a white, male, upper class, Christian, urban perspective as the only real and valid account of cricket's history.

Another important dimension to the decolonisation of sport, as Le Grange (2018) points out, is the need to give prominence to indigenous games and their possible internationalisation. A decolonial perspective necessitates action against coloniality, and one way to do this in relation to sport is to create space and opportunity for people to play and compete in indigenous games. Some headway has been made. For example, the indigenous Aboriginal people in Canada participate annually in the North American Indigenous Games, and in South Africa, while its exact origins are unclear, an Indigenous Games was held in 2017 in Johannesburg (Le Grange, 2018). Athletes and players from all provinces took part in such games as *Kjati* (rope skipping), *Diketo* (stone grabbing and throwing), *Dibeke* (running ball), *Ntonga* (stick fighting), *Drie Stokkies* (games with three sticks),



Former national cricket captain Graeme Smith came on to bat with a broken hand to save the test match for South Africa against Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground in January 2009. His entry onto the field was met with tumultuous applause, and he was lauded as one of the bravest men in cricket (English, 2009). A sociologist working from a symbolic-interactionist approach might ask several questions. What was the meaning of his decision to come back on to the field after serious injury? What part did his role as captain play in this decision? How might this action have influenced how he was viewed by fans from both sides as well as his interactions with team mates, opponents, coaches, former players and journalists?

Source: Allstar Picture Library Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

and two board games called *Ncuva* and *Moraborba*. As Le Grange (2018: 20) points out, these initiatives are important, not least because the games people play are “embedded in South African cultural traditions, [and have] connections to particular places and people’s identities.”

The major theoretical approaches – the structural-functional approach, the social-conflict approach (providing class, race and gender analyses), the symbolic-interaction approach and the decolonial approach – provide different insights into sports, and none by itself presents the whole story. Applied to any issue, each approach generates its own interpretations. To appreciate the power of the sociological perspective fully, you should become familiar with all these approaches.

The ‘Controversy and debate’ box that follows discusses the use of the sociological perspective and reviews many of the ideas presented in this chapter. This box raises a number of questions that will help you understand how sociological generalisations differ from the common **stereotypes** we encounter every day.

stereotype

simplified description applied to every person in some category

Controversy and debate

Is sociology nothing more than stereotypes?

Koketso: (raising her eyes from her notebook) Today in sociology class, we talked about stereotypes.

Tessa: (trying to focus on her science lab) OK, here’s one: roommates don’t like to be disturbed when they’re studying.

Koketso: Seriously, my studious friend, we all have stereotypes, even lecturers.

Tessa: (becoming faintly interested) Like what?

Koketso: Doctor Ndaba said today in class that if you’re a Protestant, you’re likely to kill yourself. And then Chido – this girl from, I think, Zimbabwe – says something like, “You South Africans are rich, but you’re scared to get married, and when you do, hey, you love to divorce!”

Tessa: My brother said to me last week, “Everybody knows you have to be black to play for Bafana Bafana.” Now there’s a stereotype!

Students, like everyone else, are quick to make generalisations about people. And as this chapter has explained, sociologists, too, like to generalise by looking for social patterns. However, beginning students of sociology may wonder if generalisations aren’t really the same thing as stereotypes. For example, are the statements reported by Koketso and Tessa true generalisations or false stereotypes?

Let’s first be clear that a stereotype is a simplified description applied to every person in some category. Each of the statements made at the beginning of this box is a stereotype that is false for three reasons. First, rather than describing averages, each statement describes every person in some category in exactly the same way; second, even though stereotypes often contain an element of truth, each statement ignores facts and distorts reality; and third, each statement seems to be motivated by bias, sounding more like a put-down than a fair-minded observation.

What about sociology? If our discipline looks for social patterns and makes generalisations, does it express stereotypes? The answer is no, for three reasons. First, sociologists do not carelessly apply any generalisation to everyone in a category. Second, sociologists make sure that a generalisation squares with the available facts. And third, sociologists offer generalisations fair-mindedly, with an interest in getting at the truth.

Koketso remembered her lecturer saying (although not in quite the same words) that the suicide rate among Protestants is higher than among Catholics or Jews. Based on information presented previously in this chapter, you know that is a true statement. However, the way in which Koketso incorrectly reported the classroom remark – “If you’re a Protestant, you’re likely to kill yourself” – is not good sociology. It is not a true generalisation because the vast majority of Protestants do no such thing. It would be just as wrong to jump to the conclusion that because a particular friend is a Protestant male, he is about to end his own life. (Imagine refusing to lend money to a roommate who happens to be a Methodist, explaining, “Well, given the way people like you commit suicide, I might never get my money back!”)

Furthermore, sociologists shape their generalisations to the available facts. A more factual version of the statement Chido made in class is that on average, the South African population does have a higher standard of living than Zimbabwe, fewer people are getting formally married and although few people take pleasure in divorcing, our divorce rate is also among the world’s highest.

Finally, sociologists try to be fair-minded and want to get at the truth. The statement made by Tessa’s brother about black South Africans and the national soccer team can be challenged because it employs an unfair stereotype about the players who are chosen



A sociology course is a good place to get at the truth behind common stereotypes.

Source: Shutterstock.

for the team as well as on a number of other fronts. First, we need to be clear about the way in which we use various terms and what we mean when we use them; what does Tessa's brother mean when he says 'black'? Does this refer only to black Africans or does it include coloureds and Indians/Asians? Second, if he is referring only to black Africans, then the facts do not support his view because black African men's representation in the team is proportionate to their share of the population as a whole. And third, the statement is simply not true and seems motivated by bias rather than truth-seeking.

The bottom line is that good sociological generalisations are not the same as harmful stereotypes. A sociology course is an excellent setting for getting at the truth behind common stereotypes. The classroom encourages discussion and offers the factual information you need to decide whether a particular statement is a valid sociological generalisation or a harmful or unfair stereotype.

What do you think?

1. Can you think of a common stereotype of lawyers (or women, elderly people or Xhosa people, for example)? What is it? After reading this box, do you still think it is valid?
2. Do you think taking a sociology course could help revise people's stereotypes? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of a stereotype of your own that might be challenged by sociological analysis?

Seeing sociology in everyday life

Why do couples marry?

We asked this question at the beginning of this chapter. The common-sense answer is that people marry because they are in love. However, as this chapter has explained, society guides our everyday lives, and the power of society affects everything we do, think and feel. Look at the three photographs that follow, each showing two people whom, we can assume, are 'in love' with each other. In each case, can you provide some of the rest of the story? By looking at the categories that the people involved represent, explain how society is at work in bringing the two people together.

Hint: Society is at work on many levels. Consider the following:

- Rules about same-sex and other-sex marriage
- Laws defining the categories of people whom one may marry
- The importance of race and ethnicity
- The importance of social class
- The importance of age
- The importance of social exchange (what each partner offers the other).

All societies enforce various rules that state who should or should not marry whom.



In which ways does this couple follow the patterns of marriage in our society? To what extent are they 'typical' of most married couples in South Africa?

Source: Prostock-studio/Shutterstock.



In which ways does this couple follow the patterns of marriage in our society? In which ways do they not?

Source: fizkes/Shutterstock.



What social changes in South Africa were necessary for this couple to be married? What changes are still necessary for them to be broadly accepted in our society?

Source: Lital Israeli/Shutterstock.

Seeing sociology in your everyday life

1. Analyse the marriages of your parents, other family members and friends in terms of class, race, age, religion and other factors. What evidence can you find that society guides the feelings that we call 'love'?
2. As this chapter has explained, the time in human history when we are born and the society in which we are born as well as our class position, race and gender all shape the personal experiences we have throughout our lives. Does this mean we have no power over our own destiny? No, in fact, the more we understand how society works, the more power we have to shape our own lives. For example, how has your deepened understanding of marriage, sports or some other topic discussed in this chapter changed the way in which you think or the decisions you are likely to make?

Chapter summary

Chapter 1 The sociological perspective

The sociological perspective

- The sociological perspective reveals the power of society to shape individual lives.
- What we commonly think of as personal choice – whether or not to go to university, how many children we will have, even the decision to end our own life – is affected by social forces.
- Emile Durkheim identified the ‘social facts’ that influence our lives.
- Peter Berger described the sociological perspective as ‘seeing the general in the particular’.
- C. Wright Mills called this point of view the ‘sociological imagination’, claiming it transforms personal troubles into public issues.
- Both structure and agency have an influence on our social biographies.
- The experience of being an outsider or of living through a social crisis can encourage people to use the sociological perspective.

The importance of a global perspective

- Where we live – in a high-income country such as the United Kingdom, a middle-income country such as South Africa or a low-income country such as Mali – shapes the lives we lead.
- Societies throughout the world are increasingly interconnected.
- New technology allows people around the world to share popular trends.
- Trade across national boundaries has created a global economy.
- Learning about life in other societies helps us learn more about ourselves.

Applying the sociological perspective

- Research by sociologists plays an important role in shaping public policy.
- On a personal level, using the sociological perspective helps us see the opportunities and limits in our lives and empowers us to be active citizens.
- A background in sociology is excellent preparation for success in many different careers.

The origins of sociology

- Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth-century Muslim thinker from North Africa, is now considered to be the ‘father’ of sociology.
- Rapid social change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western Europe helped trigger the development of modern society and the emergence of formal sociology.
- The rise of an industrial economy moved work from homes to factories, weakening the traditions that had guided community life for centuries.
- The explosive growth of cities created many social problems, such as crime and homelessness.
- Political change based on ideas of individual liberty and individual rights encouraged people to question the structure of society.
- Cultural change emphasised reason and rationality as the means of gaining knowledge about the world.
- Expansion of the West into other parts of the world provided the resources needed to feed the developing modern industrial societies of Europe.
- Auguste Comte coined the term ‘sociology’ in 1838 to describe a new way of looking at society.
- Sociology has a scientific approach to understanding society, but this is different from the ways in which natural scientists use science to understand the natural world.
- Studying human beings requires different methods from those used to study the natural world.
- By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, sociology had spread around the globe, including to South Africa.
- Three phases can be identified in the history of sociology in South Africa:
 - In colonial times between 1900 and 1947, sociology was offered at universities, but was a service discipline to social work.
 - During apartheid South Africa (1948–1993), sociology separated from social work. There was a clear split in focus and methods between the sociologies taught at Afrikaans- and English-medium historically white universities. Sociology was introduced in historically black universities.
 - From 1994 to the present, the demands of the democratic transition have led to a weakening of the discipline, and revitalisation, especially through links to Africa, is required.

Sociological theory

- A theory states how facts are related, weaving observations into insight and understanding. Sociologists use four major theoretical approaches to describe the operation of society.
- At the macro level, the structural-functional approach explores how social structures – patterns of behaviour, such as religious rituals or family life – work together to help society operate.
- Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer helped develop the structural-functional approach.
- Thomas Merton pointed out that social structures have both manifest functions and latent functions; he also identified social dysfunctions as patterns that may disrupt the operation of society.
- At the macro level, the social-conflict approach shows how inequality creates conflict and causes change.
- A class analysis focuses on identifying and explaining the ways in which our economic class position shapes our social biographies.
- Karl Marx helped develop a class analysis of capitalist economies.
- A gender analysis focuses on ways in which society places men in positions of power over women.
- A race analysis focuses on the advantages – including higher income, more schooling and better health – that society gives to white people over black people (including black Africans, coloureds and Indians/Asians, by categories used during apartheid).
- At the micro level, the symbolic-interaction approach studies how the everyday interactions of people construct the social reality that they experience.
- Max Weber's claim that people's beliefs and values shape society is the basis of the social-interaction approach.
- At the macro level, decolonial approaches show how the legacies of colonialism in the economic, political, social and cultural spheres remain after independence from formal colonialism, in ways that disadvantage societies and peoples of the Global South.
- Anibal Quijano, Walter Dignolo and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni are some key thinkers of this approach.

Applying the approaches: The sociology of sport

- The structural-functional approach looks at how sport helps society function smoothly.
- Manifest functions of sport include providing recreation, a means of getting in physical shape and a relatively harmless way to let off steam.
- Latent functions of sport include building social relationships and creating thousands of jobs.
- The social-conflict approach looks at the links between sport and social inequality.
- Some sports are mainly accessible to affluent people.
- Men's sports tend to have more prestige in society and are therefore more lucrative for players, coaches, sporting associations and the media.
- Racial discrimination exists in professional sport.
- The social-interaction approach looks at the different meanings and understandings people have of sport.
- Within a team, players affect each other's understanding of the sport.
- The reaction of the public can affect how players perceive their sport.
- The decolonial approach looks at how coloniality figures in sport so that our understandings of sport are informed by a history that is based solely on a white male perspective.
- A major task for this approach is thus to rewrite the histories of sport to weave in the experiences of those who have been excluded from the historical accounts, especially women and black players, coaches, fans and administrators.

Questions

1. Janet is doing sociological research on the causes of violent service delivery protests in some areas in Mpumalanga. Which of the following might her research most likely involve?
 - a) Examining the personality profiles of participants
 - b) Examining the genetic predispositions of participants
 - c) Examining the testosterone levels of participants
 - d) Examining the employment rates of participants
2. Almost 40% of working-age adults in South Africa are unemployed by the expanded definition of unemployment. C. Wright Mills would regard this as a/an _____.
 - a) private trouble
 - b) public issue

- c) individual concern
 - d) structural issue
3. Which of the following would be considered a social fact?
 - a) Clothing fashions of the 1980s
 - b) Serotonin levels in the brain
 - c) Post-traumatic stress disorder
 - d) An individual's career trajectory
 4. Which of the following concepts are you least likely to find in a discussion of the functions of sport in modern society?
 - a) Cohesion
 - b) Class
 - c) Selection
 - d) Socialisation
 5. The sociological perspective does not have a _____ orientation towards the study of human behaviour.
 - a) biased and internal
 - b) systematic and group
 - c) social and empirical
 - d) group and structural
 6. Which of the following would you do if you were exercising a sociological imagination?
 - a) Ignore the social context of people's lives
 - b) Understand the link between social and structural issues
 - c) Identify the social forces that influence people's lives
 - d) View issues strictly from your own cultural perspective
 7. The Enlightenment represented a particular challenge to _____.
 - a) colonial expansion
 - b) scientific understanding
 - c) religious doctrine
 - d) empirical knowledge
 8. Which of the following would not be considered a social fact?
 - a) South Africa's healthcare policy
 - b) Diabetes rates for young South African women
 - c) Mental illness
 - d) Hospital bureaucracy
 9. Lerato is doing research on the ways in which a new environmental policy will have different benefits and disadvantages for different groups of people. She is likely to be working from a _____ theoretical perspective.
 - a) symbolic-interactionist
 - b) social-conflict
 - c) structural-functionalist
 - d) feminist
 10. Which of the following is not a benefit of the sociological perspective?
 - a) It helps us assess both opportunities and constraints in our lives.
 - b) It helps us judge some cultures as superior to other cultures.
 - c) It helps us live in a diverse world.
 - d) It helps us assess the truth of common sense.