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Can't We All Just Get Along?
A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DIVERSITY

Since the late 1700s, Irish Americans living in New York City have put on an annual St. Patrick's Day parade. Marching down a 1.5-mile parade route through Manhattan's Midtown, the event features an exuberant collection of firefighters, military and police groups, bands, and social and cultural clubs. With approximately 150,000 formal participants and upward of 2 million onlookers, it is the largest St. Patrick's Day parade in the world. While the occasion began as a way to honor the homeland, it has morphed into an "all-American" affair, with celebrants raising a glass of beer and proclaiming that at least for one day of the year, "Everyone's a little Irish." The city of Chicago celebrates the day with the bold gesture of dyeing the Chicago River green. Down in Savannah, Georgia—where many Irish immigrants arrived as indentured servants—the event resembles Mardi Gras, with much of the city transformed into an open-air party.

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PHOTO 1.1
St. Patrick's day in Chicago shows how the Irish have *assimilated* and been embraced over time.

Three months later, in lower Manhattan, a similarly exuberant parade takes place. Dating back to the early 1970s, the annual "Pride March" commemorates the starting point of the gay civil rights movement. Initially a way to remind people of the police aggression that took place at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village on June 28, 1969, the event has grown larger and more celebratory over time. In 2019, for example, an estimated 150,000 marchers and several million onlookers celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising. In addition to brightly colored floats featuring dance music and scantily clad revelers, the parade features an assemblage of politicians, entertainers, religious organizations, and ordinary families—all in a public effort to normalize sexual diversity in our society.

Given the celebratory nature of both parades, it is ironic that one group historically excluded from New York City's St. Patrick's Day parade were those wishing to march as *gay* Irish Americans. While gay Irish Americans are welcome to march in the parade, they are banned from doing so in a way that explicitly proclaims their gay pride. During the spring of 2014, discontent with the ban intensified. Guinness and Heineken brewers, major sponsors of the event, pulled their support for the parade, and Mayor Bill de Blasio opted to march in the Queens St. Patrick's Day parade instead—which has no restrictions on public declarations of being both gay and Irish. The next year, the Manhattan parade organization ended the prohibitions on openly gay marchers, finally allowing participants to declare, "Kiss me, I'm Irish *and* gay." Nearby Staten Island, however, has held fast to its ban on openly gay marchers, arguing that the parade is about Irish pride, first and foremost, not about politics, sexual identity, or any other side issue.

What these modern celebrations generally lack, and what the 25-year push for gay inclusion in Manhattan's St. Patrick's Day parade tended to obscure, is a historical perspective. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Irish Americans were a much-maligned social group. When they arrived in the United States during the 1800s,

PHOTO 1.2
Gay-Friendly St. Patrick's Day parade.

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Irish Catholic immigrants were treated with suspicion. Depicted in newspapers and magazines as animals and uncivilized pagans, Irish Catholics experienced exclusion for many decades. Historically, St. Patrick's Day parades were a way to voice public opposition to nativist movements in the United States that stigmatized immigrant groups like the Irish, while also making a statement against oppression by the Protestant British in the homeland. The political flavor of the St. Patrick's Day parade, and the underlying theme of pride in the face of stigma and oppression, is now echoed in gay pride parades across the country. Despite these similarities, some Americans remain uncomfortable with public declarations of "gay pride"—which they see as overly hedonistic and excessively "in your face."

This "tale of two parades" highlights many themes woven throughout this book. This chapter provides an overview of the sociological perspective and a vocabulary for talking about two issues at the heart of sociology: diversity and inequality. While sociologists and others embrace diversity and believe that it enriches society, the presence of diversity also seems to go hand-in-hand with inequality. When groups are different from one another—whether in terms of culture, religion, race, or ethnicity—these differences are often transformed into inequalities. This theme will reemerge in the second half of the chapter. For now, we turn to a discussion of sociological perspective, and two of the major themes that characterize it; we then turn to a more focused discussion of how sociologists look at diversity and inequality.

ILLUSTRATING THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the simplest terms, **sociology** can be defined as the systematic study of human society. Referring to it as "systematic" means that sociology is an academic field that uses the scientific method and other rigorous techniques to develop its theories and knowledge. Yet describing it as the study of "human society" is vague, given that psychology, anthropology, and history also study human society. In fact, the same social phenomena might be studied in each of these fields—alcohol consumption, for example, or marriage and the family, just to name a few—yet how each field approaches these topics differs. Considering the many ways in which the human experience can be studied, several characteristics make the sociological perspective unique. This section highlights two consistent themes running through the field of sociology: the notion that much of our social world is socially constructed and that many social phenomena can be understood best by looking at them from both a micro- and a macro-level perspective.

Is It Spit or Saliva? The Socially Constructed Nature of Our Social Worlds

Take a moment to think about what is going on in your mouth right now. While we rarely stop to do so, there is a fascinating phenomenon happening all the time, in our mouths. Permit me, for a moment, to direct your attention to the saliva that currently

coats the inside of your mouth, minding its own business. It lives there every day, all day, not bothering anyone. In fact, it has an important job to do, helping with digestion and protecting teeth from decay. Although you may feel a twinge of awkwardness now that I have asked you to focus on its existence, the fact of the matter is that a substance we call saliva is an ordinary, unquestioned resident of your mouth.

Next consider what happens when that saliva exits your mouth. If you are consuming a beverage, it becomes the forbidden substance known as "backwash." If you feel an excess of saliva building up in your mouth and you expel it on the ground, it becomes "spit." While there are some instances when the saliva that leaves our mouths may carry infection or chewing tobacco residue, generally the substance that leaves our mouth—what we call spit—is no different from the substance just chilling in your mouth—what we call saliva. Yet if I were to spit into a spoon, and then immediately reingest that exact same substance, onlookers would surely be disgusted. The nature of this disgust raises interesting questions, given that these two substances have the same chemical composition: The substance is essentially the same, the only difference being whether it is located inside or outside the mouth.

To understand how saliva becomes spit, one needs to understand the sociological perspective—in this case, the idea that much of our social world is socially constructed. To say that something is **socially constructed** is to draw attention to the fact that it is humans who give meaning to their worlds. We give meaning to things as seemingly trivial as the distinction between spit and saliva. The distinction between these two substances—one considered normal and the other considered disgusting—is simply a matter of human definition. Humans give meaning to many other concepts, such as what it means to be an alcoholic, have a mental illness, or be a child. Childhood is socially constructed because it is humans who decide when childhood begins and ends (it has no inherent biological definition), what children are like (evil or precious?), and how they should be treated. Within this text, much of our attention will be focused on the ways in which gender, sexuality, race, and social class are socially constructed.

There are two components to the process by which our worlds are socially constructed. First, humans give meaning to their worlds through face-to-face communication. The unique power of the human brain is that our species can interact symbolically; that means that we can think in abstract terms, give objects and phenomena disparate meanings. We do this together, rather than individually. Although there might be some variations, Americans are likely to believe that childhood ends around age 18. The meanings we give to our social worlds—whether in naming spit or saliva, or gender and sexuality—are co-constructions built out of human interaction. Children learn these definitions through socialization—the process by which we learn our society's cultural rules and expectations. Later in life, they either perpetuate these definitions by continuing to act on them, or they challenge them by proposing new meanings. When enough people jointly agree that childhood ends later than we originally thought, or that the line between forbidden and acceptable sexual acts needs to be redrawn, a new social construction emerges.

Yet humans do not create these definitions out of thin air. The second thing to know about our worlds being socially constructed is that these meanings arise from the **social structure**. The social structure generally refers to the large-scale social institutions that make up society. These institutions include the family, religious authorities and organizations, economic arrangements, the political order, mass media and communications, and more. To take a concrete example, we know that definitions of gender have changed over time and vary across cultures: What it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman are historically and cross-culturally variable. We know that gender is socially constructed because gender role expectations are very different today than they were in the 1700s. It was, in large part, religious and economic transformations that led to changes in gender role expectations. As society has become more secular, and as society has moved from an industrial economy that needs physical strength to an information-based economy built on service skills and intellectual knowledge, gender roles have changed. These broad social transformations have given new opportunities to men and women, thereby socially reconstructing gender roles. These changing conceptions of masculinity and femininity did not happen overnight, nor did they emerge out of nowhere: They arose out of transformations in the social structure (and through social movements aimed at explicitly changing dynamics of power and privilege).

By adopting the social constructionist perspective, sociologists reject the notion that social phenomena are rooted in an inherent reality. In this sense, the social constructionist perspective stands in opposition to the **essentialist perspective**. The essentialist perspective generally views social phenomena as fixed and transhistorical—universally true regardless of a social or historical context. A common theme within the essentialist perspective is the assumption that social phenomena are rooted in underlying biological realities. In the case of gender differences, one belief is that men and women are different due to biological differences in brain structure, hormones, and so forth. Applied to race, an essentialist perspective might argue that there are distinct racial groups and that social differences between these groups—in terms of talents and traits—are rooted in biological differences.

The social constructionist perspective, however, challenges these assumptions. It derives its analytic power from examining the world from a historical and cross-cultural perspective. When we take time to examine the human variations that exist cross-culturally and that have existed historically, it is almost impossible to identify any social phenomenon that is universally true. What it means to be a man or woman—ideal manifestations of masculinity and femininity—varies historically and cross-culturally. Consider, for example, masculinity in Arab cultures: Although men have social dominance and that homosexuality is highly stigmatized, men also have close relationships with one another and may be seen walking arm-in-arm down the street. This version of masculinity is different from the one seen in northern Europe, which is different still from the *machismo* (intense masculine power that strongly differentiates male and female roles) found in many Latin American cultures. Using an entirely different example—in this case men involved in an intimate sex act—a cross-cultural perspective shows that the

FIGURE 1.1   Illustrating the Sociological Perspective: Social Constructionism

SPIT	SALIVA
• Abnormal, unnatural	▪ Normal, natural
• Stigmatized, dangerous	▪ Preferred, safe
• Chemically the same as saliva	▪ Chemically the same as spit

physical act between men may be considered forbidden in one society (spit) but idealized in another (saliva). Figure 1.1 illustrates the sociological perspective, focusing on social constructionism.

Throughout this text, I use the metaphors of the *study-abroad trip* and *traveling through time* to illustrate the social constructionist perspective; these metaphors take us on a journey that draws our attention to cross-cultural and historical variations in social phenomena. In doing so, we see both the incredible creativity and variation that humans bring to their lived experiences as well as the role that social structures play in shaping those experiences.

The Player and the Game: Bringing Together the Micro- and Macro-Level Perspectives

"Anyone can make it if they try." This is one of the core beliefs in American life. This belief emphasizes individualism and agency above all else. It expresses limitless faith in human potential and recognizes no external barriers to one's success or well-being. This statement suggests that in the game of life, the talents, desires, and motivations of the player—or individual—are of primary importance. So how would a sociologist evaluate this claim? To answer that question, we turn to the work of Malcolm Gladwell, an award-winning journalist who has been recognized for bringing sociological ideas to the public's attention in his best-selling books, *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, and *Outliers*.

In his book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell examines the lives of especially successful people—Microsoft founder Bill Gates, the Beatles—and looks for common themes in their achievements. These were immensely talented people who without doubt worked hard and made it. Yet one example from his book, drawn from the work of Canadian psychologist Roger Barnsley, illustrates the sociological perspective, showing that one's lot in life is not simply about individual effort. In his analysis of elite Canadian hockey players, Barnsley observed a unique pattern: 40% of the players on elite junior teams were born in the first three months of the year, and only 10% were born in the last three months of the year. Gladwell reports similar patterns in Swedish and Czech hockey teams. What is it about being born in the first three months of the year that makes those players 4 times more likely to "make it," in this case playing hockey at the elite level?

If only the will and talent of the player mattered, it is unlikely that the data would display this pattern. Indeed, there is little reason to believe players born early in the year

have special endowments of talent or motivation. In fact, neither Barnsley nor Gladwell attributed these players' success to their individual traits. Instead, the authors focused on the nature of the game. I do not mean the game of hockey itself; I mean "the game" in terms of the structure and rules that govern this particular phenomenon. When it comes to how competitive hockey is structured in Canada, Gladwell wrote: "It's simply that in Canada the eligibility cutoff for age-class hockey is January 1. A boy who turns ten on January 2, then, could be playing along-side someone who doesn't turn ten until the end of the year—and at that age, in pre-adolescence, a twelve-month gap in age represents an enormous difference in physical maturity." The ever-so-slightly older child is stronger and more coordinated; that player, then, gets better coaching, practices more frequently, and has better teammates to play with. By the age of 13, these "cumulative advantages" add up, so that the initially small advantage of being born early in the year later on appears as exceptional talent and motivation. In reality, that child won the birth-month lottery, playing a game that provided a special advantage.

So what does this example have to do with the sociological perspective? It helps illustrate the dual importance of the micro- and macro-level forces. The micro level refers to the individual. It focuses on the ways that social phenomena reflect individual circumstances. Success as a hockey player, for example, is partially a reflection of individual traits like height and build, talent and motivation, and having the financial ability to participate. Elsewhere in this book, we consider one's educational success. From a micro-level perspective, how one performs in school is a reflection of individual traits: intelligence, motivation, understanding of how the educational system works, support for school at home. Indeed, sociologists believe that individual factors—like what we eat and how much we work out—shape how long we live. Throughout this book, I use the metaphor of "**the player**" to illustrate the micro-level perspective.

What the player brings to the game clearly matters, but the player does not independently define the rules of the game. Sociologists acknowledge, then, that macro-level factors also matter for our social experiences. The macro level refers to the structural level of society and, especially, the social institutions that comprise it. The **macro level** is characterized by rules and policies, as well as historical and cultural realities that exist outside of the individual but shape that individual's experiences, nonetheless. I use the metaphor of "**the game**" to illustrate the macro-level perspective.

In the example of competitive hockey, the player does not get to choose what rule is used to establish the cutoff for playing in a particular age group. Players are subject to those rules, and these rules benefit some players more than others. Beyond the hockey example, sociologists focus on the structure of education when examining school success. The system of school funding in the United States, which relies on local property taxes, benefits some players more than others. Because of this macro-level factor, some students go to schools with rich resources and others schools that lack resources. In terms of how long a person may live, the game is structured in such a way that some groups are systematically exposed to more toxins and environmental health threats than others. While individuals can elect to move to a new location, they cannot alter the fact that highways

FIGURE 1.2   Illustrating the Macro and Micro Levels
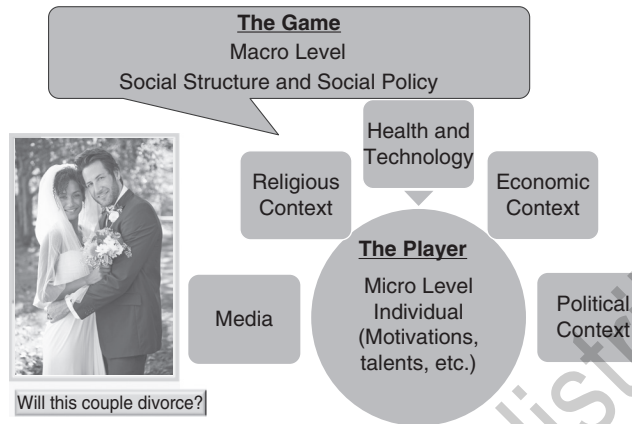
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and toxic waste sites are systematically located in areas where poor people and minorities live. Figure 1.2 illustrates these concepts.

Throughout this book, I use the metaphor of "the player" and the "the game" to draw attention to how individuals are always embedded within a social context. In 1959, sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the term the **sociological imagination** to describe sociology's unique emphasis on the macro- and micro-level dimensions of society. For

PHOTO 1.3
Sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the term the "sociological imagination."

Archive Photos/Getty Images

Mills, the power of sociology is that it identifies the interconnections between an individual's *biography*, on the one hand, and the *historical context* of society, on the other. Mills argued, and I agree, that the sociological perspective is especially valuable because it provides a tool for comprehensively understanding social phenomena. In many cases, what initially appear as *personal troubles*—such as being unemployed, getting divorced, or being diagnosed with a chronic illness—can better be understood as a *public issue*. While an individual couple may be incompatible and have poor communication skills, when the divorce rate rises precipitously—as it did during the early 1970s—there is likely more going on than simply

a spike in individual couples who cannot communicate. When divorce laws changed in the early 1970s, many underlying personal troubles became a broader public issue: The introduction of no-fault divorce laws made divorce far more accessible, thereby altering the macro-level context in which individual couples sought to resolve their differences. By bringing these two components together, we can better understand social differences and inequalities, including why some people earn more than others and why some people live long healthy lives and others do not.

The Role of Power in Sociological Thinking

The sociological perspective cannot be discussed without discussing the issue of power. For sociologists, power stands at the heart of most social issues. With respect to social constructionism, not everyone has the same amount of power to have their view of reality become the dominant one. Although our socially constructed realities emerge out of shared meanings and human interactions, sociologists note that minority groups struggle to gain recognition for their understandings of reality. The belief that "Black Lives Matter," for example, may be quickly countered with the response that "All Lives Matter." It has taken a major social movement (BLM) for this statement to become something that society as a whole is even willing to consider.

Power is also evident in terms of how the social structure and the game are organized. Not everyone has the same level of influence over the social institutions and policies that make up the macro level of society. As mentioned, one central aspect of how the educational system is structured in the United States is that public schools are funded by taxes collected at the local level; accordingly, school districts with a strong property tax base will have more resources than those with a weak property tax base. Historically, this "rule" was put in place to ensure local control over public schools. Today, this rule remains in place in part because it benefits people with privilege, who have the power to defend it; those disadvantaged by this rule have limited power and resources to try to alter this aspect of the educational game. As you move through this text, keep thinking about who has the power to decide what is saliva (normal and socially acceptable) and what is spit (abnormal and deviant) and who has the power to mold the social institutions—schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, medical systems, media outlets—that structure our lived experiences.

THINKING ABOUT DIVERSITY: SOCIAL IDENTITIES AS A MATTER OF DIFFERENCE OR DEFICIENCIES?

What is diversity? Is it something that enriches society, where different religions, racial and ethnic groups, and gender and sexual identities come together and each contributes something unique and valuable to the culture? Or is it something that fragments and fractures society, where differences undermine a strong, collective identity? The "tale of two parades" that opens this chapter addresses these questions and others. How is it that

an Irish St. Patrick's Day parade is considered a positive expression of ethnic pride and a reason to celebrate, while a structurally similar gay pride parade can be considered an affront to core social values?

Diversity refers to the statistical mix of social groups and cultures, especially in terms of religion, sexual expression, gender identity, disability, social class, and racial and ethnic identity. Sociologists and others talk about diversity in terms of our **social identities**, or those group memberships by which we define ourselves in relation to other social groups. This contrasts with a person's individual identity, which refers to the personal traits (hobbies, interests, abilities, personality) by which we define ourselves in relation to other individuals. Sociology is primarily the study of social identities. Sociologists assume that it matters whether we are male or female, white or nonwhite, poor or wealthy, Christian or Muslim. It matters to our sense of self, as well as our day-to-day life experiences and opportunities. All of us, moreover, have multiple social identities: I, for example, am a white, heterosexual female, who grew up lower income but now occupies a solidly middle-class position. Each of these individual social identities intersects with the others to form a more complicated, yet comprehensive, social identity.

This more complex identity is one's social location. **Social location** refers to one's position in the social structure. My social location is different from a lower-income Black male who identifies as bisexual or from a wealthy Cuban American woman who has a physical disability. Our social locations differ in the degree of power or privilege associated with them. Sociologists believe, for example, that men have more social privilege than women and that heterosexuality is an invisible "norm" in society, so that it too is associated with social privilege. These various facets of our identities come together as a complex social location, where most of us have identities that are a mix of more and less privilege, based on the interplay of our gender, sexual identity, religion, race or ethnicity, social class, or ability status. In short, our social location is both an identity and a position we hold in an unequal, stratified social system.

The first half of this book focuses on our social identities (how they are defined, how we acquire them), while the second half examines the social inequalities associated with these identities.

Social Identities: Labeling Others and Ourselves

"Cream puffs" and "cake eaters": When I was in high school, these were the names many of us at Southwest High used to describe the students at neighboring Edina High. These terms reflected the stereotype we had of these affluent students: soft, pampered, and overly indulged. Despite the fact that I had only ever met one person who had attended Edina, I had a clear stereotype of its students: They were snobby, privileged "preps."

When it comes to social identities, humans do a lot of labeling. There is an almost immediate tendency to categorize the people we come in contact with, quickly sizing them up as a "white male," "Black female," "Arab American," "woman with a disability," or even "cream puff." But why do we do this, and what are the consequences? One reason

humans are so quick to categorize and label is that our brains demand it. Imagine what life would be like if every situation we encountered was a new one? This would lead to chaos, as we sought to define every person, place, or interaction from the ground up. Instead, the human brain creates **schemas** to facilitate social interaction. Schemas are mental structures or organized patterns of thought or behavior. Most humans possess gender schemas, for example. These schemas provide a mental framework that guides our behaviors and interactions. When we size someone up as female, we are able to act in accordance with that schema. The old *Saturday Night Live* skit and movie about "Pat" illustrates this point: Because friends and coworkers could never figure out Pat's gender, their social interactions were awkward, undefined, and characterized by an ongoing quest to figure out whether Pat was he, she, or they.

Sometimes the labels and categories we use become stereotypes. A **stereotype** is an overgeneralized belief that describes an entire group of people. Many stereotypes circulate in the United States, such as these:

- "Jews are cheap."

- "Native Americans are strong, proud people."

- "Black men are skilled lovers."

- "Gay men are feminine and act like 'queens.'"

- "White people are uptight and can't dance."

The fact that stereotypes are "overgeneralized beliefs" is evident in the use of the word *are* in each statement above. Some people believe that a stereotype wouldn't exist if it didn't contain some grain of truth. But "some grain of truth" is different from the assumption that everyone in a particular category shares a particular trait. Therefore, another characteristic of stereotypes is that they are typically based on partial or incomplete evidence. Take, for example, the statement, "Gay men are feminine and act like 'queens.'" This statement may be correct if one's only piece of evidence is the television program *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Yet it would be incorrect if one had wider exposure to gay men, who clearly exhibit many personality traits and many ways of expressing their gender.

Even if a person did notice the diversity among gay men, that person's brain may have difficulty thinking about gay men in more complicated terms. This leads to another characteristic of stereotypes: They are often difficult to change. One reason for this is confirmation bias. **Confirmation bias** is the tendency for people to notice and retain information that confirms an existing belief, while at the same time ignoring or rejecting information that challenges these beliefs. Take this stereotype: "Women are terrible drivers." Imagine you are driving down the highway and become frustrated with the driver in front of you; perhaps he or she is driving too slow, using the passing lane instead of the center lane. As you pass that driver, you check them out and think, *Yep, another woman driver*. This experience confirmed a belief you have long held. Yet on your commute to work, you failed

to notice all of the women on the highway who were driving just fine or the man, two miles earlier, who drove slowly down the center lane while talking on a cell phone. Because you don't have a stereotype about men being bad drivers, you don't even take note when you see one! Stereotypes are resistant to change because they are built from mental schemas—schemas that can become deeply embedded and resistant to new information.

This brings us to an interesting question: Are stereotypes only problematic if they are negative? Is there such a thing as a positive stereotype? Many stereotypes, including several already mentioned, give praise and have positive connotations. Yet sociologists are critical of all stereotypes, even those that appear to be positive. Take the notion that Asian Americans are intelligent and hardworking, with special talents in math and technical fields. This is known as the **model minority myth**. Although this stereotype has a positive connotation, it has some negative ramifications. First, it places a large population inside a fairly narrow box. For an Asian American child who grows up hearing this stereotype, he or she may feel pressured to pursue particular academic subjects and careers; he or she may also fail to gain recognition for being a skilled illustrator or creative writer. Accordingly, such stereotypes may actually limit a person's potential.

Second, positive stereotypes can often conceal unpleasant historical realities. Take the notion that "Native Americans are strong, proud people." For many decades, people have defended athletic team mascots like the "Indians" and the "Redskins" by asserting that these mascots honor Native American people. Yet these claims about honoring Native Americans conceal the brutal treatment Native Americans have been subjected to throughout U.S. history. Since the time of European settlement, the Native population has declined dramatically. Hundreds of thousands of Native Americans have died as a result of infection, forced removals and resettlements (e.g., the Trail of Tears), and warfare. The history of Native–European contact is not one of respect or honor. My point is that stereotypes sometimes mask inequality, brutality, and the historical context out of which particular beliefs take shape. In this regard, a stereotype can function as a mechanism of power, shaping our sense of history and ideas about how diverse groups fit into society. Social movements can challenge this, though, as they did in the summer of 2020, when pressures following the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis fueled racial activism across the nation. Under pressure from corporate sponsors including Nike, FedEx, and Pepsi, the NFL team in Washington, DC, removed the racial epithet from their team name. Their decision has prompted other teams, including Cleveland's MLB team, to follow suit.

While sociologists are not fans of stereotypes, they do use a lot of generalizations. **Generalizations** are statements that describe a general pattern or tendency of a group. The following statements are generalizations:

- On average, Latinos earn less money than whites.

- Asian Americans tend to score higher on standardized math tests compared to other racial groups.

- Females are more likely than males to be nurses and teachers.

- African Americans have higher rates of incarceration than other racial/ethnic groups.

Compared to stereotypes, generalizations are not intended to describe *all* members of a group. Instead, they describe statistical rates or tendencies. Whereas stereotypes use the word *are* to describe an entire group, generalizations use words like *on average*, *tend to*, or *more/less likely*. These words highlight another key difference between stereotypes and generalizations: Generalizations are based on reliable evidence. "Reliable" in this case means that a sufficient amount of data has been assessed (hundreds or thousands of cases); it also means that the entity who has gathered this data is trustworthy. If, for example, I wanted to test the belief that "women are terrible drivers," I would have to operationalize or define my terms (what is a terrible driver?), gather data from hundreds of cases, and make sure my data analysis was sound (relevant factors were controlled for). Within the social sciences, we generally consider public opinion data from organizations like Pew and Gallup to be good data, as well as data from the federal government (Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau) and big data sets with names like the General Social Survey (GSS), National Election Studies (NES), and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Figure 1.3 provides a side-by-side comparison of stereotypes and generalizations.

If stereotypes can be used to rationalize inequality, can generalizations also be harmful? In one sense, the answer should be no: Given that they are facts, generalizations are neither harmful nor helpful; they simply are. The statement that African Americans have higher rates of incarceration is simply a statistical reality. Yet humans can feel hurt or harmed by such statements. Even if they are factual, Black students, for example, may feel a steady erosion of their confidence and well-being after sitting in a sociology (or criminal

FIGURE 1.3   Comparing Stereotypes and Generalizations

Stereotypes:
- Overgeneralized belief about members of a particular group
  - "All . . ." "Are . . ."
- Not based on direct or complete evidence
  - Anecdotal
  - Confirmation bias
- Connotations can be positive or negative
  - But impact is still negative

Generalizations:
- Statement that describes a *pattern* or *tendency* of a particular group
  - "On average . . ."
- Based on facts and reliable evidence
  - Reliable source
  - Sample size, composition
- Connotations can be positive or negative
  - But facts can be negative harmful

justice) class where the statistics presented continually portray their group in a negative light. Asian American students may feel excluded by the fact that many racial comparisons and studies of racial inequality often ignore their group altogether, offering no generalizations about or insights into their group. Sociological studies of racial and ethnic inequality remain incomplete, so that some students may feel that their realities are being erased or ignored. In this way, simple generalizations or facts become more complex—and possibly even harmful—depending on who is hearing these facts and the broader context of their presentation.

Sociology is built on the use of generalizations. The sociological perspective is founded on the assumption that the social world is patterned and that systematic differences exist across groups. How much education a person receives, how much money they earn, or how long they live is not a random occurrence. Rather, there are tendencies and patterns across groups. Even something as seemingly private and biologically based as how often a person has sex and how satisfied that person is with the experience can be linked to one's social location. One's sexual experiences are statistically predicted by gender, education, and religious identification. "Statistically predicted by" means that there is a significant relationship between variables. While sociologists acknowledge that there is lots of diversity *among* women, they are often more interest in average differences *between* men and women. Sociologists know, though, that these patterns do not apply to everyone in a group. Every generalization has its outliers: cases that defy or contradict or do not confirm to statistical tendencies. Therefore, sociologists also strive to understand these outliers, or why someone may defy expectations or "beat the odds" associated with their group.

Pluralism or Assimilation: How Societies Respond to Diversity

It is not simply that groups are labeled socially through stereotypes and categorizations or by sociologists and their use of generalizations. Indeed, many people make independent, public declarations of their group affinities. Some people hang flags from their car's rearview mirror proclaiming their country of origin. Across the southern United States, T-shirts and bumper stickers use Confederate flags to assert "Dixie pride." In more subtle ways, wearing a necklace decorated with a Star of David or cross can be interpreted as a public statement of one's religious beliefs and group membership. In addition to the individual declarations of group memberships, there are within the United States many examples of public celebrations—like St. Patrick's Day or gay pride parades—that allow people to identify as members of a group. While St. Patrick's Day parades have become mainstream, gay pride parades are still met in some communities with discomfort—as the opening vignette illustrated. In other contexts, wearing a cross necklace may be considered a normal and subtle (saliva) expression of one's religious beliefs, while wearing a headscarf—denoting one's Muslim faith—may be regarded as extreme or strange (spit). These examples raise the question: How do societies respond to diversity?

The question of diversity is increasingly important in our interconnected world. In the current era of globalization, people, jobs, ideas, and culture fluidly move across

national boundaries. Although many see the United States as especially unique in terms of its diversity, many countries have similarly high or even higher levels of diversity. Like the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Australia all had substantial Native populations before being colonized by Europeans. Subsequent waves of colonization brought Europeans to many corners of the globe; in many cases, Europeans brought enslaved persons from Africa to South America, North America, and the Caribbean. During the 1800s, workers from China and Japan were brought to Canada, the United States, and many South American countries to work on expanding railroad lines and growing port cities. During the same period, Europeans from countries like Ireland, Greece, and Italy left their homelands seeking better economic opportunities. In more recent decades, refugees have fled countries around the globe, seeking economic, political, and social freedom. Today, within European countries and North America, the percentage of the population that is foreign-born ranges from 9% to 28% (see Table 1.1). Because of these global population flows, many people live in societies that are diverse in terms of culture, language, and religion; their schools and workplaces may also reflect this diversity.

While diversity has to do with who is present in a social or institutional setting, and captures group differences in a statistical sense, **inclusion** refers to how those groups get along or interact. It has to do with the culture of that setting and the degree to which members of different groups are recognized and appreciated. A society or group can be diverse, statistically, but if that group does not value or recognize the cultural differences within it, it is not inclusive. This insight leads us into a conversation about how societies and social institutions respond to diversity.

While it would be wonderful to believe that diverse groups can peacefully coexist, that is less often the case. **Pluralism** occurs when different groups are able to maintain

TABLE **1.1**   Percentage Foreign-Born in Diverse Societies

Country	Percentage Foreign-Born
Australia	29.6%
Switzerland	29.5%
Canada	20.78%
Sweden	18.80%
Germany	16.00%
United Kingdom	13.79%
United States	13.62%
France	12.49%
Italy	10.42%

Source: OECD (2019).

their cultural uniqueness within the context of a diverse society. Under pluralism, diverse groups' values and cultural practices are accepted, if not appreciated, within society. Pluralism can apply to different forms of cultural difference, including religion, ethnicity, language, and sexual expression. A pluralistic society would not, for example, legally establish one official language; instead, it would allow multiple languages to be used in schools and for official governmental purposes (e.g., election ballots, drivers' license manuals). In truly pluralistic societies, cultural differences are not considered threatening. Switzerland is one example of a pluralistic society, where French, German, and Italian are official languages and equally respective cultural traditions. These cultural differences are not perceived as a threat to tradition or social cohesion. In a pluralistic society, a St. Patrick's Day parade and Dominican heritage parade could occur on back-to-back weekends, and both celebrations would be recognized, if not celebrated.

Many societies, including the United States, struggle to be truly pluralistic. One country that has faced repeated controversies in recent decades for its response to diversity is France. Historically, France has placed much emphasis on the notion of the *citoyen*, or citizen. Since the French Revolution ended in 1799, great effort has been made to build a unified, egalitarian French society. France has strived to unite its population into a cohesive civic body, composed of people who identify as French above all else. Since 1905, France has had a law declaring a separation between church and state; as part of this law, schools and governments are prohibited from endorsing any religious teachings or practices. In 2004, this law was strengthened by then-president Jacques Chirac, who passed a law banning the conspicuous (i.e., visible) display of religious symbolism within schools. Supporters of the law argued that public declarations of one's religious beliefs might compromise values of secularism and citizenship, central components of French identity. Technically, the law applies to all forms of religious expression; therefore, a student who displays a cross necklace is prohibited from doing so, as would be a Sikh student wearing a turban, a Jewish student wearing a yarmulke, and a Muslim student wearing a headscarf. Although all religious groups are covered by the law, many commentators believe it was sparked by the influx of Muslim immigrants from Africa.

While violent disturbances have occurred in French neighborhoods, home to immigrant and refugee populations from France's former colonies and other countries in Africa, since the 1960s, tensions peaked during the 2010s with terrorist attacks and riots against police brutality. In 2015, tensions over culture and religion—many of France's foreign-born population are Muslim—erupted, first when the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical publication, were subject to a terror attack for printing images of Allah considered offensive to some in the Muslim community, and later when a gunman representing an Islamic militia opened fire on the Bataclan nightclub in Paris, killing 90 people. In 2020, retired software sales manager Mohamed Amghar—born in France, to Algerian parents—filed a discrimination complaint against his former employer, accusing them of making him use the traditional French name "Antoine" while at work. The *New York Times* quotes Amghar contesting the cultural practice, saying, "I have only one name, I have only one nationality. My name is Mohamed and I am French" (Breeden 2020).

Because diversity is often perceived as threatening to the collective well-being, many societies—like France—tend toward assimilation rather than pluralism. **Assimilation** is the process by which cultural differences are incorporated into existing cultural patterns, with the goal of achieving a single, cohesive culture. Assimilation typically involves changes to a group's language use (abandonment of their native language), residential location (movement out of ethnic enclaves and into the "wider community"), and higher rates of intermarriage. Rather than adding their flavor to the mix, assimilation often means that newcomers are pressured to leave their culture behind and adopt the norms, values, language, or religious beliefs of the majority society. Figure 1.4 compares the differences between assimilation and pluralism.

Illustrating these terms with a metaphor, pluralism can be compared to a stir-fry or tossed salad. In both dishes, additional ingredients can be added into the mix, but each ingredient adds something unique to the whole. A tossed salad is made delicious by rich and creamy cheese, the crunch of a crouton, and the freshness of the vegetables. With assimilation, the metaphor of the "melting pot" is often used. This suggests a soup pot where ingredients are added and individual flavors break down and blend into the whole. Yet with assimilation, it is unclear whether each new ingredient blends into the existing flavors or the existing flavors retain their dominance—the richness and juiciness of the roasted meat—despite the addition of a carrot or potato.

Beyond the metaphor of the melting pot, the process of assimilation raises questions of power and of whose culture counts. In many cases, whose culture counts is the group with the largest population, which typically translates to those with the greatest political or social power. These dynamics have been evident in battles over **English-only laws**, which strive to make English the official language of the United States. While the United States does not have an official language at the federal level, more than half of its states have passed laws making English the official language. Support for these laws generally rests on three basic arguments: first, learning English is the key to upward mobility; second, learning English shows allegiance to the United States and its culture; and third, having a single language promotes government efficiency and a cohesive social or national identity. Embedded in arguments is the concern that those who use another language or
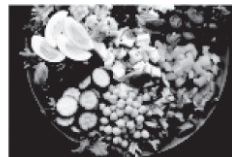
FIGURE **1.4**   Comparing Assimilation and Pluralism

ASSIMILATION
- Cultural differences meld together into a cohesive whole;
- Yet other cultures are expected to integrate into the dominant culture

PLURALISM
- Cultural differences remain distinct
- Each culture is appreciated for its unique contribution

retain their cultural traditions are disloyal or threatening to society as a whole. Echoing this sentiment, the website for ProEnglish (2021), an advocacy group for English-only policies, states that "in pluralistic nations such as ours, the function of government should be to foster and support the similarities that unite us, rather than institutionalize the differences that divide us."

Like many issues sociologists focus on, the significance of today's English-only laws can better be understood by adding historical perspective. Struggles over diversity and how to incorporate newcomers are not new to the United States. When my grandmother asked me some years ago why her Mexican coworkers at a fast-food restaurant "don't want to learn English," she was echoing a centuries-old sentiment. What she didn't realize was the irony—maybe even hypocrisy—of her question. One hundred and fifty years ago, the same questions were asked of German immigrants who wanted German to be the official language of instruction in their public schools in Chicago, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. As a woman who proudly proclaimed her Irish heritage, my grandmother was unaware that 150 years earlier, Irish immigrants were similarly stigmatized, and many wondered why the Irish wouldn't give up their "primitive" Catholic religion and assimilate into the Protestant faith. My points here are twofold: First, while the United States has long struggled with questions of diversity, what has changed is which groups are considered outsiders; second, the existing culture is typically considered the normal and preferred culture, so that newcomers are expected to adapt to it, rather than retain their own cultural patterns.

While the United States may strive to be a pluralistic society, the push for English-only laws show that pressures to assimilate remain. Instead of regarding cultural differences as enriching to society, differences of culture, language, and religion are often treated as problematic or deficiencies: something that makes a culture less than. In the United States, wearing a headscarf may be seen as strange, deviant, or oppressive. It is forgotten that many women in the United States wear veils on their wedding days, and that the Virgin Mary and many Catholic nuns also wear headscarves. Instead of recognizing these points of commonality, people in diverse societies may treat one set of religious beliefs as saliva (normal) and others as spit (abnormal or deviant).

Applying the same logic to gender differences, men's ways of doing things are often defined as normative. **Normative behaviors** are social behaviors and cultural practices that are defined as normal and expected; other behaviors are judged in relation to this standard. When Hillary Clinton ran to be the Democratic nominee for president of the United States in 2008 and again in 2016, she was sometimes criticized for being "too emotional." Some commentators wondered whether someone who cries had the emotional strength needed to be president. When winning an award or a championship, recipients sometimes say, "I told myself I wasn't going to cry." When stressed-out students cry in my office, they often apologize for doing so. These examples suggest that crying in our society is defined as a sign of weakness. But why? Crying could be viewed as evidence of passion and commitment, or a functional way to process emotions. A sociologist might argue that crying is stigmatized not for any inherent reason but because such emotional expressions

are associated with women. Men's behaviors are considered the norm, and any deviation from that norm is regarded with skepticism. Therefore, crying is bad.

These examples lead to another sociological observation: Once cultural differences exist, they are often transformed into a cultural hierarchy. The notion of a cultural hierarchy suggests that some cultural practices are better than others. Returning to the example of gender differences on the campaign trail, being emotionally restrained and of rational mind—stereotypically male traits—may be defined as *better than* being emotionally expressive and guided by emotional principles.

In other cases, notions of cultural hierarchy and superiority are more subtle: Some cultural practices are considered normal and others are considered weird. As discussed in Chapter 10, job applications with "Black names" like Lakisha and Jamal are less likely to receive a callback compared to those with "white names" like Brendan and Emily (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Although it would be difficult to argue that Emily is a "better" name than Lakisha, some of my students advise parents to give their kids "normal names"—like Emily and Brendan—to protect them from discrimination. This suggestion reflects the belief that names like John, Michael, Andrew, Kristin, and Sarah are not just more common than names like Malik, Tyrone, Latoya, and Ebony, but that they are normal and the standard by which other names are judged. Once something is considered different, even in the most mild or subtle sense, it sets up the possibility that those in power or those whose culture is considered normal will negatively evaluate those who are seen as different. This sense of difference as deviance may then translate into discrimination when it comes to jobs, housing, or other opportunities.

Immigrants to the United States have understood this reality for hundreds of years. As waves of immigrants have come to the United States since the early 1800s, many have Anglicized or Americanized their last names. **Americanized**, in this sense, refers to the process by which cultural traditions like family names, language, food, and religion lose some of their original "flavor" and take on characteristics of American culture. Within the United States, this is part of assimilation. For the last two centuries, many immigrants to the United States Anglicized (made them sound more English) their names as a way to downplay their ethnic origins. German piano maker Heinrich Engelhard Steinweg, for example, became Henry E. Steinway when he founded his company in America. Hundreds of Irish and Scottish immigrants dropped the O's and Mc/Macs from their names (e.g., O'Sullivan), while Polish "-skis" and Greek "opolous(es)" did the same. Perhaps your family members changed their names when they arrived in the United States, hoping to fit in. More recent research shows that current waves of immigrants are more likely to hold on to their names. This is one indicator that the United States is becoming a more pluralistic society, where groups face less pressure to give up their cultural uniqueness.

MOVING FORWARD

As a sociologist, I often find that "the more things change, the more they stay the same." While the United States shows signs of increased pluralism, there are lingering pressures

to assimilate. The sweep of the last 200 years appears to be one of greater tolerance, social integration, and equality, yet enduring inequalities and exclusion remain. While fewer immigrants are changing their names now compared to previous generations and higher percentages of Americans are marrying across racial and ethnic boundaries, occasional incidents remind us that hierarchies and inequalities remain. The year 2020, for example, is noteworthy for the degree to which #BlackLivesMatter and "taking a knee" went from a fringe movement—and a statement that got Colin Kaepernick blacklisted in the NFL—to a mainstream movement where entire teams began taking a knee and NBA players donned jerseys that proclaimed "Say Their Names" (e.g., George Floyd, Brianna Taylor) in the area where their own names usually appeared. One NBA player got scrutinized for *not* taking a knee during the national anthem, and eventually the summer of 2020 peaked when the NBA, the WNBA, Major League Soccer, Major League Baseball, and grand slam champion Naomi Osaka all refused to compete, in an effort to draw greater attention to the issue of systemic racism and police brutality.

The sociological perspective can contribute much toward understanding phenomena like these. First, it can help us understand how our identities, and the social inequalities that often accompany them, are socially constructed. This means that it is humans who have decided what various languages, religions, and cultural practices mean and which of these forms of diversity are considered saliva (normal and preferred) and which are considered spit (abnormal and deviant). Yet the notion that our social world is socially constructed also allows for change and transformations in these differences. Over time, the Irish moved from a position of deviance and stigma in society to being considered normal and typical. Even more, one day of the year, many Americans jump on the Irish bandwagon.

Second, the sociological perspective helps us understand how our identities and inequalities are constituted at both the micro and macro levels. As we will see throughout this book, dynamics at the individual level perpetuate our understandings of difference and diversity, and individual-level factors shape our positions in the social structure. At the same time, there are larger institutional forces at play. Emphasis on the macro level demonstrates the role of power in structuring social inequality and shows that, at the micro level, not everyone has the same ability to influence social inequality or the socially constructed nature of our worlds.

As you read this book, I hope to leave you with many broader lessons. First, I hope to share with you how wonderfully creative and powerful human beings are. We have tremendous power to shape our social realities; our historical and cross-cultural understandings show that we do so in remarkably different ways. Second, I hope to convince you that human beings are powerful agents of social change. While inequality appears to be a nearly universal feature of human societies, so is social change. In conjunction with our creativity and power, many humans today are engaged in efforts to transform society and erode differences and inequalities that often appear all too enduring.

REVIEW OF KEY POINTS

- Sociology is the systematic, or scientific, study of human society.

- The sociological perspective sees much of the world as "socially constructed"—composed of phenomena that humans define and to which they give meaning.

- The sociological perspective is distinct from the essentialist perspective, which sees social phenomena as shaped by underlying biological forces.

- The sociological perspective blends the micro- (player, individual) and macro-level (game, structural) perspectives; sociologists believe that focusing on these two dimensions provides a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena.

- The "sociological imagination" is C. Wright Mills's term for the perspective that blends the emphasis on the individual and the social; this perspective seeks to differentiate personal troubles and public issues.

- The sociological perspective can be used to study concepts related to diversity.

- It is natural to pay attention to differences between social groups. When we use stereotypes, however, we see differences as universal and totalizing; when we use generalizations we see variations and patterns, most of which are drawn from systematic data.

- Pluralism and assimilation are two strategies societies use to manage diversity; one emphasizes the acknowledgment and appreciation of differences, while the other emphasizes the blending of differences into a more homogeneous culture.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What does it mean to say that something is socially constructed? How might this concept apply to a social phenomenon like homosexuality or same-sex attraction?

2. How does the essentialist perspective compare to the social constructionist perspective? How would essentialist perspective explain a social phenomenon like homosexuality or same-sex attraction?

3. When you think about social phenomena like differences between men and women, or the fact that some humans demonstrate attraction to the same sex while others are attracted to the other sex, are you more compelled by the social constructionist explanation or the essentialist explanation?

4. The sociological perspective explains social phenomena by bringing together micro- and macro-level understandings. What are these two components, and what does each contribute to a broader understanding of the social world?

5. According to the sociological perspective, why is labeling such an important part of the human experience?

6. What is confirmation bias, and what role does it play in the perpetuation of stereotypes?

7. Pluralism and assimilation are two ways in which societies tend to incorporate diversity. What are these two approaches, and how do they differ?

8. In what ways do you see the United States as a pluralistic society? In what ways is it assimilationist? Of these two approaches, which do you think provides the most strength to a society?

KEY TERMS

Americanized 19
assimilation 17
confirmation bias 11
diversity 10
English-only laws 17
essentialist perspective 5
"the game"/macro-level 7
generalizations 12
inclusion 15
model minority myth 12
normative behaviors 18

"the player"/micro-level 7
pluralism 15
schemas 11
social identities 10
social location 10
social structure 5
socially constructed 4
sociological imagination 8
sociology 3
stereotype 11

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