

FOURTH  
EDITION

# SOCIAL PROBLEMS

S O C I E T Y I N C R I S I S



DANIEL J. CURRAN ■ CLAIRE M. RENZETTI



# SOCIAL PROBLEMS

## *Society in Crisis*

FOURTH EDITION

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## Preface

As authors of a social problems text, our conundrum is that the conditions we choose to analyze may change dramatically before the ink is even dry on the printed page. No less significant, of course, are the social changes that occur between editions of such a text. At the end of the day, we simply do our best and rely on able instructors in the classroom to append, revise, and correct our omissions, oversights, and miscalculated predictions. Often these instructors share their teaching experiences with authors, and in preparing this fourth edition, we were the fortunate recipients of the expertise and advice of colleagues who have used or reviewed previous editions of this text. Many of the changes found on the pages that follow reflect their advice.

This by no means absolves us from responsibility for the current contents of the book. Ultimately, the decisions regarding what to include as well as how to discuss it rest with the authors. What is new in this fourth edition of *Social Problems*? Space permits us to highlight only a few of the most important changes here. Chapter 1 has been rewritten to incorporate more diverse sociological perspectives of social problems and to more accurately reflect the historical development of sociology in Europe and the United States. The presentation has also been simplified considerably to make it more comprehensible to students who are likely to have little or no background in sociology, or even the social sciences. Chapter 2 combines an analysis of economic and political problems, which in previous editions were presented in separate chapters. This allows for an emphasis on the interplay between economics and politics, but again, the presentation has been simplified, particularly with regard to the discussion of economic indicators. Chapters 5 and 6 have been rewritten to provide more thorough coverage of issues related to sexuality, sexual orientation, and diversity in intimate relationships. The chapter on crime and the criminal justice system has been expanded into two chapters in this edition, reflecting instructors' and students' growing concern about the crime problem and our society's responses to it. Chapter 10 covers theories of crime and provides an expanded discussion of violent crime and the drugs–crime relationship. Chapter 11 discusses criminal justice systems. All chapters have been thoroughly updated.

Despite these and many other changes, significant features that appeared in previous editions of the book have been retained in this edition. Specifically, we continue to emphasize the importance of equipping students with *usable knowledge* about the social problems they encounter in their everyday lives and that they may expect to confront in the future as workers and as citizens. Although our emphasis continues to be on institutional crises rather than individual deviance, considerable attention has been given to the human side of social problems—our role as social beings acting individually and collectively

to generate as well as remedy social problems. We encourage our readers to link the “public issues” with their “private troubles,” remaining true to the adage, “The personal is political.” Moreover, we have held fast to our goal of assisting students in broadening their views of the social world. We want them to see themselves as responsible members of a world community, not just as citizens of a single country. Consequently, the emphasis on the global nature of social problems that characterized previous editions of the book also informs this edition. Finally, although considerably more attention has been given to diverse theoretical perspectives, the critical or conflict perspective continues to be prominent throughout our discussions.

A number of new pedagogical aids are available with this edition. Within the text, each chapter concludes with a summary enumerating the major points. There is also a list of key terms with their definitions, as well as several suggested readings. Throughout each chapter, the key terms are highlighted by bold print so that students may study them in the context in which they were introduced. A complete glossary now appears at the end of the book. “Solving Social Problems through Social Action” boxes, a special feature in previous editions, have been revised and updated; these boxes received an overwhelmingly positive response because of their focus on specific individuals and organizations that are working hard to solve some of society’s most difficult problems. Each chapter also contains an “International Connections” box as well as “Insights” boxes, the former reinforcing the theme of global interconnectedness and the latter highlighting a cogent issue.

Allyn and Bacon offers an extensive supplements package to accompany this text. A study guide, which reviews the text material and provides sample test questions, has been prepared for students. The exercises that appear at the end of each chapter in the text are coordinated with the segments that appear on the accompanying CNN video. The Instructor’s Manual provides chapter summaries, classroom activities, and film suggestions, and includes a guide to the CNN video that will aid instructors in the use of the CNN Video Exercises at the end of each chapter. The Test Bank is available in a new and improved computerized format, ESATEST III for IBM (DOS and Windows) and Macintosh; ESATEST also includes a GRADEBOOK disk that allows instructors to track students’ grades. The *Washington Post* reader continues to be available as a supplement. Finally, another helpful element of the Supplements Package is a set of overhead transparency masters. These utilize charts and figures from the text as well as new graphic material that can be presented on overheads in the classroom, thus visually augmenting instructors’ lectures and facilitating student’s access to relevant data. The transparency masters are also available on computer disk, in Microsoft Powerpoint presentation software.

We wish to thank the reviewers who have been involved in the process of revising this text; their invaluable suggestions have been incorporated into the revision wherever possible: Lee D. Millar Bidwell, Longwood College; William Burger, Longwood College; Roland Chilton, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Patrick Donnelly, University of Dayton; Daniel T. Gallego, Weber State University; John Hamlin, University of Minnesota, Duluth; Hart M. Nelsen, Penn State University; James E. Payne, St. Edward’s Uni-

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Obviously, a good deal of hard work went into the making of this book, and we wish we could claim all the credit for it. However, in addition to the feedback from reviewers, we also received invaluable assistance from the staff at Allyn and Bacon. Several people, though, merit special thanks. Our sincere gratitude goes first to our editor, Karen Hanson, whose enthusiasm and energy about this project were, fortunately, contagious. We were also blessed with the skills of developmental editor, Judy Fifer. Susan McIntyre, Senior Production Administrator, worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that all the details of the production process were complete. We owe her a large debt of gratitude. To Kathy Smith, who saw this book, like so many others we have written, through production with incredible patience and good humor, we again are grateful. Finally, there are those who don't actually work on the book, but nevertheless have to *live* with it. To our sons, Sean and Aidan, to whom we dedicate this book, our unending thanks for your patience.

# Contents

## Chapter 1 Studying Social Problems

What Is a Social Problem? 2

Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems 5

What Is Sociology? 5

The European Origins of Sociology 6

Sociology and the Study of Social Problems in the United States 10

Methods of Sociological Research 20

The Perspectives of This Text 27

Chapter Summary 28

Key Terms 29

Suggested Readings 30

CNN Video Exercise 31

How Do They Stay on Top? 36

Services: The New Economy 38

Work in the U.S.A: The Plight of Workers, the Underpaid, the Underemployed, and the Unemployed 41

Working for a Fair Wage 41

Unemployment 42

Underemployment: The Dilemma for the New and the Experienced Worker 44

Unions: The Struggle for Survival 45

The Right to a Safe Workplace 46

The U.S. Economy: Back on Top? 48

The United States and the Global Marketplace 48

Multinationalization 49

Making National Decisions:

The Political Process 53

Big Government 54

The Federal Budget 55

People or PACs: Who Influences Our Representatives? 57

The People's Power in a Democracy: Voting 57

Gender and Race as Factors in the Political Process 59

Money, Influence, and Congress 60

Problems in the Legislative Process 62

The Final Check: The Judiciary 63

## Chapter 2 Economics, Politics, and Power

The U.S. Economy: Realities and Challenges 34

The Industrial Foundation: Concentrated Power and Wealth 35

## Protecting National Interests in the Post–Cold War Period 64

*Coping with Change: The State of the  
U.S. Military 65*

*Defense as Big Business: The Military-  
Industrial Complex 66*

## The International Scene: New World Order or Disorder? 69

*The Ideological Battleground 69*

*The Continued Threat of  
Conventional War 71*

## Politics in a Changing World Community: Problems, Old and New 72

*The Consequences of Change 73*

## The Reality of the World System 78

Chapter Summary 80

Key Terms 81

Suggested Readings 81

**CNN** Video Exercise 82

*The Wealthy 97*

*Middle America: The Professional-Managerial  
and Working Classes 100*

## Poverty in the United States 101

*The Realities of U.S. Poverty 101*

*Who Are the Poor? The Basic Facts 103*

*Why the Poor Are Poor: Theoretical  
Explanations 105*

## Governmental Efforts to Reduce Poverty: Why Have We Failed? 111

*Federal Responses to Poverty:  
From the 1930s to the 1990s 111*

*Poverty and Federal Policy in the  
1980s and 1990s 115*

Chapter Summary 117

Key Terms 118

Suggested Readings 118

**CNN** Video Exercise 119

## Chapter 3 Poverty, Social Class, and Inequality 83

### Global Inequality: An Overview 84

*Assessing Global Inequality 86*

*Hunger: The Problem and  
the Challenge 89*

### Inequality in the United States 91

*A Profile of U.S. Inequality 91*

### The Idea of Social Class in the United States 96

## Chapter 4 Racial and Ethnic Inequality 121

### Ethnicity, Race, and Minority Group Status 123

*Prejudice and Discrimination 125*

### Assessing the Impact of Racism: Four Examples 127

*African Americans 127*

*Native Americans 133*

*Asian Americans 140*

*Hispanic Americans 145*

### The International Dimension of Racism 149



**Explaining Racism 152**

Chapter Summary 154

Key Terms 156

Suggested Readings 156

CNN Video Exercise 157

**Chapter 5 Gender Inequality and Heterosexism 159****Sociological Perspectives on Gender and Sexual Orientation 161***Sociobiology and Gender 161**The Gay Brain and the Gay Gene 162**A Feminist Sociology of Gender 163***The Status of Women and Men in Contemporary Society 165***Gender and Sexual Orientation in the Media 165**Sexism and Heterosexism in Education 168**The Workplace 173**Justice for All? 179***The Women's Movement and the Gay Rights Movement: Political Consciousness and Social Change 187***Feminism, Past and Present 187**Gay and Lesbian Rights 190*

Chapter Summary 192

Key Terms 193

Suggested Readings 194

CNN Video Exercise 195

**Chapter 6 Problems in Intimate Relationships 197****Contemporary Families: Diversity and Change 198****Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom 200***Sexuality 200**Reproductive Freedom 201***Varieties of Intimate Relationships 206***Heterosexual Marriages 206**Single-Parent Families 211**Singles and Domestic Partnerships 216***The Dark Side of Intimacy: Domestic Violence 221***Partner Abuse in Heterosexual Relationships 222**Partner Abuse in Gay and Lesbian Relationships 227**Child Abuse 228**Elder Abuse 230*

Chapter Summary 232

Key Terms 233

Suggested Readings 233

CNN Video Exercise 234

**Chapter 7 Ageism 235****The Increasing Precariousness of Childhood 236**

**The Graying of the World's  
Population 240**

**Stereotypes of Aging and the Aged 240**

*Senility and Other Aging Myths 241*

*Explaining Ageist Attitudes toward  
the Elderly 244*

**Gender, Race, Social Class,  
and Aging 247**

*Social Security 250*

*Additional Forms of Old-Age  
Assistance 252*

*Earnings 255*

**Meeting the Housing and Medical  
Needs of the Elderly 256**

*Where Do the Elderly Live? 257*

*Nursing Homes: Custody or Care? 261*

**Senior Power 264**

Chapter Summary 267

Key Terms 268

Suggested Readings 268

CNN Video Exercise 269

**Chapter 8 Crises in Education 271**

**Education Expenses: Who Foots  
the Bill? 272**

*Financing Elementary and  
Secondary Education 275*

*Racial Segregation and Desegregation  
in the Schools 278*

**Schools as "Sorting Machines" 281**

*The Consequences of Tracking 282*

*Testing Intelligence 284*

*Curriculum and Personnel:*

*Teaching Inequality 288*

*Alternatives to Unequal Schooling 290*

**Confronting the Issue of  
"Quality" Education 292**

*Teaching: The Maligned Profession 294*

*Schools and School Reform 299*

Chapter Summary 304

Key Terms 305

Suggested Readings 305

CNN Video Exercise 306

**Chapter 9 Problems of Illness and  
Health Care 307**

**The Social Nature of  
Medical Concepts 308**

*Theoretical Models of Health  
and Illness 309*

**Health in the United States:  
A Nation of Contrasts 310**

*Sex and Health 313*

*Race and Health 318*

*Social Class and Health 318*

**Health Care in the  
United States 319**

*Physicians: The Lynchpin of the Health  
Care Network 319*

**The Medical-Industrial Complex 322**

**Insuring Our Nation's Health 324**

*Medicare 325*

*Medicaid 326*

*The Uninsured 327*

<b>A Healthy Mind</b>	<b>329</b>
<i>Understanding Mental Illness</i>	<i>329</i>
<i>Incidence and Types of Mental Disorder</i>	<i>331</i>
<i>Treating Mental Illness</i>	<i>334</i>
Chapter Summary	339
Key Terms	340
Suggested Readings	340
CNN Video Exercise	341

<i>The Nature and Extent of Drug Use</i>	<i>372</i>
<i>Efforts to Curtail Drug Distribution</i>	<i>373</i>
Chapter Summary	374
Key Terms	375
Suggested Readings	375
CNN Video Exercise	376

## **Chapter 10 Crime, Violence, and Drugs 343**

<b>Why Do People Commit Crimes?</b>	<b>345</b>
<i>Born Criminal</i>	<i>345</i>
<i>Intelligence and Crime</i>	<i>346</i>
<i>Sociological Theories of Crime</i>	<i>347</i>
<i>Broken Homes and Crime</i>	<i>349</i>
<i>Crime and Power</i>	<i>350</i>
<b>The Crime Problem</b>	<b>351</b>
<i>Alternatives to the Uniform Crime Reports</i>	<i>354</i>
<b>Violence: The Main Concern</b>	<b>355</b>
<i>Guns, Youth, and Violence</i>	<i>357</i>
<b>The Other Side of Crime: Off the Street, into the Conference Room</b>	<b>361</b>
<i>Crime at Work</i>	<i>361</i>
<i>Occupational Crime</i>	<i>362</i>
<i>Organizational Crime</i>	<i>363</i>
<i>Organized Crime</i>	<i>369</i>
<b>The Relationship between Drugs and Crime</b>	<b>369</b>
<i>Drugs, Crime, and Gender</i>	<i>371</i>

## **Chapter 11 The Justice System 377**

<b>Theories of Law Creation</b>	<b>378</b>
<i>The Written Law versus the Law in Action</i>	<i>380</i>
<b>Structural Problems of the Justice System</b>	<b>383</b>
<i>Policing Society</i>	<i>383</i>
<b>Youthful Offenders and the Juvenile Justice System</b>	<b>390</b>
<i>Juvenile Corrections</i>	<i>392</i>
<b>The Judicial Process</b>	<b>393</b>
<i>Sentencing</i>	<i>396</i>
<b>Corrections</b>	<b>399</b>
<i>Prisons</i>	<i>400</i>
<i>Probation</i>	<i>401</i>
<b>Crime and Criminal Justice in Socialist and Developing Nations</b>	<b>402</b>
<i>Crime in an International Context</i>	<i>403</i>
<i>Alternative Systems of Criminal Justice</i>	<i>406</i>

Chapter Summary	408
Key Terms	408
Suggested Readings	409
CNN Video Exercise	410

## Chapter 12 Threats to the Natural Environment 411

<i>The Natural Environment:</i>	
<i>Conservation or Destruction?</i>	412
<i>The Ecological System</i>	413
<i>The Depletion of Natural Resources</i>	413
<i>Natural Resources</i>	415

### Human Domination of the Natural Environment 420

<i>Human Disruption of the Natural Environment</i>	420
<i>Toxic Waste: Easier Made Than Undone</i>	425

### Energy: The Universal Resource 429

<i>Energy Efficiency</i>	431
<i>The Search for Alternative Renewable Energy Sources</i>	432

### Nuclear Power: From Boom to Bust 435

<i>The Cost of Progress</i>	435
<i>Issues of Health and Safety</i>	436

### Making Policies to Safeguard the Future of Our Environment 441

Chapter Summary	444
Key Terms	444
Suggested Readings	445
CNN Video Exercise	446

## Chapter 13 Population, Urbanization, and Housing Problems 447

### The Population Crisis 448

<i>Trends in World Population Growth</i>	450
<i>Magnitude of the Population Problem</i>	452
<i>Urbanization in the Third World</i>	453
<i>Slowing Population Growth</i>	455

### Problems of the Urban Environment 458

#### The City 459

### No Place to Live: The Growing Housing Crisis in the United States 462

### The Plight of the Homeless 466

Chapter Summary	470
Key Terms	471
Suggested Readings	471
CNN Video Exercise	472

## Chapter 14 Taking a Stand on Social Problems: From Theory to Practice 473

Key Term	476
Suggested Readings	477

### Bibliography 479

### Glossary 525

### Name Index 531

### Subject Index 541

# ChAPTeR one



*Studying*

*Social*

*Problems*





In this text we will introduce you to a sociological analysis of social problems. This statement, though hardly surprising given the titles of the book and the course in which you have enrolled, nevertheless begs several important questions: Specifically, what is a social problem? What is sociology, for that matter? And how do sociologists study and explain social problems? Our primary task in this first chapter, therefore, is to answer each of these questions. Let's consider them in turn.

## *What Is a Social Problem?*

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What counts as a *social problem*? After all, there is a wide variety of conditions and phenomena that might be considered problematic by some observers, but not all are defined as social problems. When does a problem become a *social problem*? To begin to address these questions, it is helpful to consider a distinction drawn more than three decades ago by the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959). In identifying social problems, Mills maintained, one must distinguish *public issues* from *personal troubles*. In the summer of 1994, for example, the public's attention was riveted on the investigation of the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson, allegedly committed by her former husband, O. J. Simpson. In media reports of the case, Nicole Simpson was described repeatedly as a battered wife. Spouse abuse and other forms of domestic violence historically have been considered private family problems (see Chapter 6). It was widely believed that only a very small number of women were ever beaten by their intimate partners. If such a problem occurs so rarely, it is easy to attribute it to some personal fault or pathology in the perpetrator, the victim, or both. In fact, like much of the general public and even many help providers, battered women themselves believed that they were the only ones who were experiencing this problem and that there must be something wrong with them. Wife battering, in other words, was thought to be a personal trouble of a few "abnormal" couples. During the Simpson investigation, however, the media began to report research findings showing that, even by conservative estimates, between two million and six million women are abused each year by their partners. Battering is so prevalent that it is the most frequent cause of injury to women in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994; see also Chapter 6).

When a problem of such magnitude occurs, it is no longer a private matter, but rather a *public issue*. It also becomes more difficult to attribute its causes to the personal defects of a few individuals. Instead, its causes are more systemic, and this requires us to examine how personal experiences are influenced and shaped by social factors that are endemic to the society in which we live. For instance, in the case of wife battering, rather than asking, "What's wrong with those men who batter?" or "What's wrong with those women who get battered?" we might ask instead, "How do our society's norms regarding masculinity and femininity and those regulating gender relations contribute to a high rate of wife abuse?" and "Does the differential power accorded men and women in our society contribute to wife abuse?"



*The trial of O.J. Simpson for the murder of his wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, raised awareness of the widespread incidence of domestic violence, transforming partner abuse from a private trouble to a public issue.*

We will discuss the problem of domestic violence at length in Chapter 6. For now, however, let's use Mills's distinction and our understanding of it from the example to construct a working definition of a social problem. A **social problem** is a condition caused by factors endemic to a particular society that systematically disadvantages or harms a specific segment or a significant number of the society's population.

Of course, textbook definitions rarely capture the richness and complexity of the phenomena they seek to define, and ours is no exception. Some readers might argue, in fact, that our definition raises more questions than it answers. First, we are confronted with the question of what constitutes a *significant* number of the population. Moreover, one might ask whether the opinion of each member of a society, or even of a specific community within a society, carries equal weight. Might not some issues get more attention because powerful or influential individuals or groups label them "important"?

We may be tempted to respond to the first question that a situation should be studied as a social problem only if a *majority* of a society's members define it as such. One drawback of this approach, though, is that the majority's opinion may be inaccurate or may even be part of the problem. Jerome Manis (1974) provides a historical example that illustrates the dangers inherent in simply accepting majority opinion. In the mid-1800s the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, a federal law that dispossessed Native Americans of their land and forced the relocation of Eastern tribes to the West. As part of this relocation, thousands of Cherokees were forced to march from the southeastern states to Oklahoma. About 4,000 Cherokees died during the march, known as the "Trail of Tears" (see Chapter 4). Although some white people

opposed this policy, the majority supported it because they viewed Native Americans as a social problem. As we will learn in Chapter 4, the majority of white citizens in the United States continue to conceptualize race relations in terms of the “problems” people of color pose for whites, rather than in terms of how the privileged status conferred by whiteness produces racial injustices (Frankenberg, 1993; West, 1993). In short, majority opinion may be wrong, or it may serve to grossly distort the situation in question. Consequently, in identifying social problems, sociologists need to critically analyze majority opinion rather than accept it or reject it outright.

Our caution in using majority opinion to identify or gauge the significance of social problems should not be taken to mean that we devalue people’s self-assessments of their life circumstances. Rather, we wish to emphasize that one’s social location in a particular society—that is, the combination of one’s social class, race, sex, age, and sexual orientation—influences one’s experiences and opportunities, as well as one’s definition of a situation as desirable or problematic. In other words, “there is a link between where one stands in society and what one perceives” (Frankenberg, 1993:8). In considering an assessment of a condition as a social problem, therefore, we must take into account whether the evaluation is coming from the vantage point of dominance or marginality in the society. As a number of writers have noted, people who have been marginalized or excluded, who have been rendered “outsiders” or “the Other,” can often see and understand with the greatest clarity the problematic nature of a specific situation (Frankenberg, 1993; West, 1993; Collins, 1986). Indeed, as we will learn throughout this text, social problems are reproduced and perpetuated through routine, everyday practices that often seem “normal,” at least to those in positions of dominance or privilege in society (Essed, 1991). It is those who are excluded or marginalized—that is, who feel the effects of these practices—who are most likely to identify them as problems.

Unfortunately, the voices of the marginalized frequently go unheard in the process of defining specific conditions as social problems. Returning to one of our previous questions, not everyone’s opinion carries equal weight. One’s social location influences not only one’s perceptions of conditions as problematic, but also one’s ability to get others—such as policy makers and sociologists—to take notice of and respond to one’s concerns. The marginalized and disadvantaged have little power. Those with greater power—in the form of money, prestige, political clout, or organizational efficiency—typically are more effective in drawing attention to their concerns, particularly the attention of those with the authority and resources to respond (Spector and Kitsuse, 1974). This is true not only with respect to labeling a condition a social problem, but also in terms of how the problem is subsequently framed. In *framing* a social problem, we use particular terms or language to describe it. Gusfield (1989:435) points out, for example, that government subsidies to ailing industries are not called “aid to dependent factories,” nor are economic recessions described as the problems of sick business people. Yet financial aid to the poor is called *welfare*, a label that connotes personal deficiencies in those who receive assistance. “Differing language frames mean differing assessments and evaluations” (Gusfield, 1989:435). This, in turn, as we will see throughout this text, has important implications for the strategies that are advocated for solving specific social problems.

The question of solving social problems raises a third concern about the definition we have offered. That is, in attributing the causes of social problems to social or systemic factors, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of **structural determinism**. Structural determinism involves talking about “society” or “social structure” as if they were entities that are separate from the people they comprise. This produces the illusion that “Society” is something over which we have no control. However, as we have already noted, social problems are reproduced and perpetuated through the everyday activities of a society’s members and their interactions. Although we are born into a particular social structure and our social location within that structure places constraints on us, we nevertheless can act on this structure and change it. It is people who create societies and people who give meaning to social life. We must be careful, then, not to abdicate our responsibility for social problems by claiming that “society makes us do it.” *We are society.*

We have no pat solutions to the difficulties inherent in our definition of a social problem. Our goal in offering a definition is simply to provide a starting point for a sociological analysis of social problems. Clearly, there are a number of factors that affect whether a particular situation is identified officially as a social problem as well as how the problem is framed. The next question that we must address is: How have sociologists framed social problems? To answer this question, we need some understanding of what sociology is and how it began.



## *Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems*

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### What Is Sociology?

**Sociology** is the scientific study of human societies. We have already stated that societies are composed of people or, more specifically, *social actors*. In studying societies, sociologists study **human behavior**: the **collective interactions** of social actors within a particular social structure and the collective meanings that these actors give to their interactions with one another. Notice the repeated use of the word *collective* here. Unlike psychologists, sociologists do not focus on individuals and their mental or emotional states; our concern is not with internal motivations for behavior. Rather, the **basic unit of analysis** for the sociologist is the *social group*. Sociologists study how factors external to individuals give rise to particular behaviors or situations and how social actors collectively interpret these behaviors and situations.

Let’s return for a moment to the example that we discussed at the opening of this chapter: the Simpson murder investigation. In considering this case, a psychologist would likely focus on the state of mind of the alleged murderer, his particular personality traits, and events in his background that might have motivated him to commit the crime. In contrast, a sociologist considering this case would place the individuals involved in the context of their social locations, that