increased global competition or a recession. Or, because of the rapid development of certain types of technology, the college degree that may be your ticket to a rewarding career today may not qualify you even for a low-paying, entry-level position 10 years from now. And if you don’t get a good job right out of college, you may have to live at home for years after you graduate—not because you can’t face the idea of living apart from your beloved parents but because you can’t earn enough to support yourself.

Certainly government and politics affect our personal lives too. A political decision made at the local, regional, national, or even international level may result in the closing of a government agency you depend on, make the goods and services to which you have grown accustomed either more expensive or less available, or change the amount of taxes you pay. Workplace leave policies established by the government may affect your decision whether and when to have a baby. If you are homosexual, the government can determine whether or not you can be covered by your partner’s insurance policy and file a joint income tax return, whether or not you can inherit jointly acquired assets, or whether or not you can be fired from your job because of your sexual orientation. In the United States, decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court can increase or limit your options for controlling your fertility, suing an employer for discrimination, using your property however you please, buying certain products, or keeping the details of your life a private matter.

People’s personal lives can also be touched by events that occur in distant countries:

♦ In 2003, fear over the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Asia and Canada dramatically reduced international travel, thereby affecting tourism and airline jobs in the United States and elsewhere.

♦ In 2007, the worst one-day plunge in the Chinese stock market in decades instantly sent markets tumbling in Europe, South America, and the United States.

♦ Fallout from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan affects foreign trade, international migration, university enrollments, and tourism. Many American companies became skittish about opening new stores abroad because of security concerns after the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 (Eichengreen, 2001), helping to slow the U.S. economy and limiting entry-level job opportunities around the world.

♦ In 2005, Hurricane Katrina killed thousands of people, rendered hundreds of thousands homeless and unemployed, contaminated local waterways, and decimated Gulf Coast industries such as tourism and steel, lumber, and oil production. Its economic effects were felt immediately in the rest of the country where, for instance, gasoline prices skyrocketed. It will no doubt have a staggering impact on U.S. exports and on the travel industry—both nationally and internationally—in years to come.

♦ The technologically interconnected nature of the world has made the effects of international events almost instantaneous. In 2005, a brief reference in Newsweek magazine to a story about American interrogators at Guantánamo Bay flushing a copy of the Koran down a toilet instantly incited anti-American violence in several Muslim countries. The story was quickly retracted, but not before scores of people were killed or injured in the ensuing riots. These are only some of the ways that events in the larger world can affect individual lives.

The Insights of Sociology

Sociologists do not deny that individuals make choices or that they must take personal responsibility for those choices. But they are quick to point out that we cannot fully
understand things happening in our lives, private and personal though they may be, without examining the influence of the people, events, and societal features that surround us. By showing how social processes can shape us, and how individual action can in turn affect those processes, sociology provides unique insight into the taken-for-granted personal events and the large-scale cultural and global processes that make up our everyday existence.

Other disciplines study human life, too. Biologists study how the body works. Neurologists examine what goes on inside the brain. Psychologists study what goes on inside the mind to create human behavior. These disciplines focus almost exclusively on structures and processes that reside within the individual. In contrast, sociologists study what goes on among people as individuals, groups, or societies. How do social forces affect the way people interact with one another? How do people make sense of their private lives and the social worlds they occupy? How does everyday social interaction create “society”?

Personal issues like love, poverty, sexuality, aging, and prejudice are better understood within the appropriate societal context. For instance, U.S. adults tend to believe that they marry purely for love, when in fact society pressures people to marry from the same social class, religion, and race (P.L. Berger, 1963). Sociology, unlike other disciplines, forces us to look outside the tight confines of individual anatomy and personality to understand the phenomena that shape us. Consider, for example, the following situations:

♦ A young high school girl, fearing she is overweight, begins systematically starving herself in hopes of becoming more attractive.
♦ A 55-year-old stockbroker, unable to find work for three years, sinks into a depression after losing his family and his home. He now lives on the streets.
♦ A 36-year-old professor kills herself after learning that her position at the university will be terminated the following year.
♦ The student body president and valedictorian of the local high school cannot begin or end her day without several shots of whiskey.

What do these people have in common? Your first response might be that they are all suffering or have suffered terrible personal problems. If you saw them only for what they’d become—an “anorexic,” a “homeless person,” a “suicide victim,” or an “alcoholic”—you might think they have some kind of personality defect, genetic flaw, or mental problem that renders them incapable of coping with the demands of contemporary life. Maybe they simply lack the willpower to pick themselves up and move on. In short, your immediate tendency may be to focus on the unique, perhaps “abnormal,” characteristics of these people to explain their problems.

But we cannot downplay the importance of their social worlds. There is no denying that we live in a society that praises a lean body, encourages drinking to excess, and values individual achievement and economic success. Some people suffer under these conditions when they don’t measure up. This is not to say that all people exposed to the same social messages inevitably fall victim to the same problems. Some people overcome wretched childhoods; others withstand the tragedy of economic failure and begin anew; and some people are immune to narrowly defined cultural images of beauty. But to understand fully the nature of human life or of particular social problems, we must acknowledge the broader social context in which these things occur.
The Sociological Imagination

Unfortunately, we often don’t see the connections between the personal events in our everyday lives and the larger society in which we live. People in a country such as the United States, which places such a high premium on individual achievement, have difficulty looking beyond their immediate situation. Someone who loses a job, gets divorced, or flunks out of school in such a society has trouble imagining that these experiences are somehow related to massive cultural or historical processes.

The ability to see the impact of these forces on our private lives is what the famous sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) called the sociological imagination. The sociological imagination enables us to understand the larger historical picture and its meaning in our own lives. Mills argued that no matter how personal we think our experiences are, many of them can be seen as products of societywide forces. The task of sociology is to help us view our lives as the intersection between personal biography and societal history, to provide a means for us to interpret our lives and social circumstances.

Getting fired, for example, is a terrible, even traumatic private experience. Feelings of personal failure are inevitable when one loses a job. But if the unemployment rate in a community hovers at 25% or 30%—as it does in many places around the world and in many inner-city neighborhoods in the United States over the past several decades—then we must see unemployment as a social problem that has its roots in the economic and political structures of society. Being unemployed is not a character flaw or personal failure if a significant number of people in one’s community are also unemployed. Nor can we explain a spike in the unemployment rate as a sudden increase in the number of incompetent or unprepared individual workers in the labor force. As long as the economy is arranged so that employees are easily replaced or slumps inevitably occur, the social problem of unemployment cannot be solved at the personal level.

The same can be said for divorce, which people usually experience as an intimate tragedy. But in the United States, 4 out of every 10 marriages that begin this year will eventually end in divorce, and divorce rates are increasing in many countries around the world. We must therefore view divorce in the context of broader historical changes occurring throughout societies: family, law, religion, economics, and the culture as a whole. It is impossible to explain significant changes in divorce rates over time by focusing exclusively on the personal characteristics and behaviors of divorcing individuals. Divorce rates don’t rise simply because individual spouses have more difficulty getting along with one another than they used to, and they don’t fall because more husbands and wives are suddenly being nicer to each other.

Mills did not mean to imply that the sociological imagination should debilitate us—that is, force us to powerlessly perceive our lives as wholly beyond our control. In fact, the opposite is true. An awareness of the impact of social forces or world history on our personal lives is a prerequisite to any efforts we make to change our social circumstances.

Indeed, the sociological imagination allows us to recognize that the solutions to many of our most serious social problems lie not in changing the personal situations and characteristics of individual people but in changing the social institutions and roles available to them (C.W. Mills, 1959). Drug addiction, homelessness, sexual violence, hate crimes, eating disorders, suicide, and other unfortunate situations will not go away simply by treating or punishing a person who is suffering from or engaging in the behavior.