The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) contributed many important concepts to sociology. His comparison of the suicide rates of several counties revealed an underlying social factor: People are more likely to commit suicide if their ties to others in their communities are weak. Durkheim’s identification of the key role of social integration in social life remains central to sociology today.

Durkheim believed that modern societies produce feelings of isolation, much of which comes from the division of labor. In contrast, members of traditional societies, who work alongside family and neighbors and participate in similar activities, experience a high degree of social integration. The Sudanese women in the photo on the right are building a house.

Emile Durkheim and Social Integration

The primary professional goal of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was to get sociology recognized as a separate academic discipline (Coser 1977). Up to this time, sociology had been viewed as part of history and economics. Durkheim, who grew up in eastern France and was educated in both Germany and France, achieved his goal when he received the first academic appointment in sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1887.

Durkheim also had another goal: to show how social forces affect people’s behavior. To accomplish this, he conducted rigorous research. Comparing the suicide rates of several European countries, Durkheim (1897/1966) found that each country had a different suicide rate, and that these rates remained about the same year after year. He also found that different groups within a country had different suicide rates, and that these, too, remained stable from year to year. For example, Protestants, males, and the unmarried killed themselves at a higher rate than did Catholics, Jews, females, and the married. From this, Durkheim drew the insightful conclusion that suicide is not simply a matter of individuals here and there deciding to take their lives for personal reasons. Instead, social factors underlie suicide, and this is what keeps a group’s rate fairly constant year after year.

Durkheim identified social integration, the degree to which people are tied to their social group, as a key social factor in suicide. He concluded that people who have weaker social ties are more likely to commit suicide. This, he said, explains why Protestants, males, and the unmarried have higher suicide rates. This is how it works, Durkheim said: Protestantism encourages greater freedom of thought and action; males are more independent than females; and the unmarried lack the ties and responsibilities that come with marriage. In other words, members of these groups have fewer of the social bonds that keep people from committing suicide. In Durkheim’s term, they have less social integration.

Although strong social ties help protect people from suicide, Durkheim noted that in some instances strong bonds encourage suicide. An example is people who, torn apart by grief, kill themselves after their spouse dies. Their own feelings are so integrated with those of their spouse that they prefer death rather than life without the one who gave it meaning.

Despite the many years that have passed since its publication, Durkheim’s study is still quoted. His research was so thorough that the principle he uncovered still applies: People who are less socially integrated have higher rates of suicide. Even today, those same groups that Durkheim identified—Protestants, males, and the unmarried—are more likely to kill themselves.
From Durkheim’s study of suicide, we see the principle that was central in his research: *Human behavior cannot be understood only in individualistic terms; we must always examine the social forces that affect people’s lives.* Suicide, for example, appears at first to be such an intensely individual act that it would seem that psychologists should study it, not sociologists. Yet, as Durkheim illustrated, if we look at human behavior (such as suicide) only in individualistic terms, we miss its social basis. For a glimpse of what Durkheim meant, look at Figure 1.1. That African Americans and whites commit suicide in such similar ways indicates something that goes far beyond the individual. Since these patterns are similar year after year, they reflect conditions in society, such as the popularity and accessibility of guns.

**Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic**

Max Weber (Mahx VAY-ber) (1864–1920), a German sociologist and a contemporary of Durkheim, also held professorships in the new academic discipline of sociology. Like Durkheim and Marx, Weber is one of the most influential of all sociologists, and you will come across his writings and theories in later chapters. Let’s consider an issue Weber raised that remains controversial today.

**Religion and the Origin of Capitalism** Weber disagreed with Marx’s claim that economics is the central force in social change. That role, he said, belongs to religion. Weber (1904/1958) theorized that the Roman Catholic belief system encouraged followers to hold on to traditional ways of life, while the Protestant belief system encouraged its members to embrace change. Protestantism, he said, undermined people’s spiritual security. Roman Catholics believed that because they were church members, they were on the road to heaven. Protestants, however, did not share this belief. Protestants of the Calvinist tradition were told that they wouldn’t know if they were saved until Judgment Day. Uncomfortable with this, they began to look for “signs” that they were in God’s will. Eventually, they concluded that financial success was the major sign that God was on their side. To bring about this “sign” and receive spiritual comfort, they began to live frugal lives, saving their money and investing the surplus in order to make even more. This, said Weber, brought about the birth of capitalism.

Weber called this self-denying approach to life the Protestant ethic. He termed the readiness to invest capital in order to make more money the spirit of capitalism. To test his theory, Weber compared the extent of capitalism in Roman Catholic and Protestant

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**Figure 1.1** How Americans Commit Suicide

Note: The source lists no separate totals for Latinos.

Source: By the author. Based on Centers for Disease Control 2002.
Weber also stressed that to understand human behavior, we should use **Verstehen** (vare-shay-in) (a German word meaning “to understand”). Perhaps the best translation of this term is “to grasp by insight.” By emphasizing **Verstehen**, Weber meant that the best interpreter of human behavior is someone who “has been there,” someone who can understand the feelings and motivations of the people being studied. In short, we must pay attention to what are called **subjective meanings**—how people interpret their situation in life, how they view what they are doing and what is happening to them.

To better understand this term, let’s return to the homeless in our opening vignette. Why were the men so silent? Why were they so unlike the noisy, sometimes boisterous college students who swarm dorms and cafeterias?

**Verstehen** can help explain this. When I interviewed men in the shelters (and, in other settings, homeless women), they revealed their despair. Because you know—at least on some level—what the human emotion of despair is, you can apply your understanding to their situation. You know that people in despair feel a sense of hopelessness. The future looks bleak, hardly worth plodding toward. Consequently, why is it worth talking about? Who wants to hear another hard-luck story?

By applying **Verstehen**—your understanding of what it means to be human and to face some situation in life—you gain insight into other people’s behavior. In this case, you can understand these men’s silence, their lack of communication in the shelter.

**Durkheim and Social Facts**

In contrast to Weber’s emphasis on **Verstehen** and subjective meanings, Durkheim stressed what he called **social facts**. By this term, he meant the patterns of behavior that characterize a social group. Examples of social facts in the United States include June being the most popular month for weddings, suicide rates being higher among the elderly, and more births occurring on Tuesdays than on any other day of the week.

Durkheim said that we must use social facts to interpret social facts. In other words, each pattern reflects some condition of society. People all over the country don’t just coincidentally decide to do similar things, whether that is to get married or to commit suicide. If this were the case, in some years, middle-aged people would be the most likely to kill themselves, in other years, young people, and so on. **Patterns that hold true year after year indicate that as thousands and even millions of people make their individual decisions, they are responding to conditions in their society.** It is the job of the sociologist, then, to uncover social facts and to explain them through other social facts. In the following section, let’s look at how the social facts I mentioned—weddings, suicide, and births—are explained by other social facts.

**How Social Facts and Verstehen Fit Together**

Social facts and **Verstehen** go hand in hand. As a member of U.S. society, you know how June weddings are related to the end of the school year and how this month, now locked in tradition, common sentiment, and advertising, carries its own momentum. As for suicide among the elderly (see Chapter 13), you probably already have a sense of the greater despair that many older Americans feel.

But do you know why more Americans are born on Tuesday than on any other day of the week? One would expect Tuesday to be no more common than any other day, and...