

## Three Social Sciences

Over the centuries, people have turned to science to explore human societies and social relationships. This category of science is known as the **social sciences**, and it includes the study of people as individuals and as members of groups such as families, tribes and communities. The social sciences include branches such as history, civics, economics and politics. In this text, we will look at three social sciences that add to our understanding of what it means to be human: anthropology, psychology and sociology. These social sciences are sometimes known as behavioural sciences, the scientific study of human behaviour.

**Anthropology** is the study of human beings as a species and as members of different cultures. There are two major branches of anthropology: physical anthropology and cultural anthropology. Physical anthropology looks at the ways in which humans are similar to, and different from, other species; it also examines how humans have developed biologically over time. Cultural anthropology explores how culture shaped the way people lived in the past and how they live in the world today. For example, a cultural anthropologist would be curious as to why the structure of families or how children are raised varies from one culture to another.

**Psychology** is the study of human mental processes and behaviour. Theoretical psychologists try to understand general rules that guide our thinking and behaviour. They examine both overt actions (those that can be seen) and mental processes, which may be harder to discern. Overt actions include how people behave in certain situations; mental processes refer to how people think, feel, remember and learn. Clinical psycholo-



### Focus Questions

What is social science?

What are anthropology, psychology and sociology?

What will we learn in this text?

**culture**—the shared values, beliefs, behaviours and material objects of a group of people

**Figure 1-1**

An anthropologist might ask, "How does education in Canada differ from education in other cultures?" A psychologist might ask, "How do teenagers feel in specific situations at school?" A sociologist might ask, "How do girls and boys respond differently in the classroom?"

### Focus Questions

What is the purpose of social science inquiry?

What are the steps in the inquiry model?

**data**—facts, figures or other information from which conclusions can be drawn

gists use this understanding to study emotions such as anger, anxiety or depression in order to help individuals who are experiencing psychological problems.

**Sociology** is the scientific study of people in groups. It examines the relationships between people and the social structures they develop. A sociologist studies the actions and responses of individuals within a group in order to detect general patterns of human behaviour. Although each of us is unique, we also belong to different categories, such as students, teenagers, males or females, brothers or sisters and so on. Sociologists explore how the categories we belong to shape our experiences of the world. Sociologists also try to understand how society as a whole can influence our thoughts, feelings and actions.

## Social Science Inquiry

Why are anthropology, psychology and sociology known as “sciences”? It is because all three disciplines attempt to investigate human thought and behaviour in a scientific way. That is, they all follow a process of **inquiry**—an investigation that follows a formal procedure. This process can lead to answering questions about people and the world around us.

### The Inquiry Model

As outlined below, a scientific inquiry has five steps. Follow the process and then read on to learn more about some of the key stages.

- 1. Identify a problem or question.** The starting point for all inquiry is a question or a problem. This problem provides a reason for the inquiry and indicates a plan of action. For example, a social scientist might be wondering about the impact of driving on teenage life. The first step in any social science inquiry is to put the problem in the form of a question. The question in this case might be “Do students who own or have regular access to a car have lower grades in school?”
- 2. Develop a hypothesis.** A hypothesis is a possible answer to a question and a starting point for further investigation. This step is crucial because without a hypothesis an inquirer can waste a lot of energy looking for information that may not be relevant to the answer. A hypothesis indicates what needs to be tested and which research method to use. For instance, the social science inquirer might hypothesize that owning or having regular access to a car has a negative effect on school grades.
- 3. Gather data.** The inquirer must determine how to gather data or information. The method of research used should be appropriate to the question and the hypothesis. In the social sciences, a number of