Social Structure and Group Behavior

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- characteristics of social structure
- social structures and society
- the nature of groups and organizations
- social interaction

How do you answer the question, "What did you do today?" You probably respond by describing events that made the day different from others, such as making an "A" on an English test or seeing an old friend. You probably would not elaborate on brushing your teeth or eating lunch. Yet it is the routine and usual events of our lives that provide the structure for human society.

From a sociologist's point of view, the daily patterns that include ordinary interactions are more significant than unique events. These patterned behaviors, which often occur in groups and institutions, form the social structure that allows a society to continue, even though its individual citizens die. Analyzing social structure, behavior in groups, and interactions among people and groups helps us understand the way people live in society.

Characteristics of Social Structure

Social structure refers to the way in which a society is organized into predictable relationships. A social structure consists of a network of lasting, orderly relationships among people. One way sociologists look at these relationships is in terms of statuses and roles.

What Is Status?

For sociologists, **status** describes an individual's position within a large group or society and the relation of that person to others in the group. Every member of the group has a status. Also, everyone belongs to many different groups, so we all have many statuses. As we move through life, our statuses change as the groups we belong to and our circumstances change. **EXAMPLE:** A new baby, while very much loved and treasured, is not regarded with respect, and we don't ask that baby for his or her opinion about where the family should go on vacation or anything else. *Baby* is the term that describes that individual's status in the family. His or her status will change with age. When grown, the adult has probably formed a new family and has a very different status from the baby, and such terms as *wife, husband,* and *parent* can describe the new status.

Sociologists often categorize statuses into **two** types, based on whether they are assigned by society or achieved by an individual.

1. **Ascribed statuses** are assigned to a person by society without regard for the individual's talents or abilities. A person's gender, race, and ethnicity can affect his or her status in the groups to which he or she belongs. So, as we've seen, can one's age. **EXAMPLES:** *Senior citizen* is a status that a person cannot change. So, too, are such statuses as *son, daughter, niece,* and the like. Ascribed statuses have significant social meanings in a culture: They often grant privileges to some and restrict privileges for others.

2. **Achieved statuses** come through traits, talents, actions, efforts, activities, and accomplishments. **EXAMPLE:** You have the status of *student.* If you take an after-school job, you will become an *employee,* a status gained through your own efforts. In simple, family-based societies, achieved statuses are limited: *warrior, farmer, magician, trading partner.* However, in a complex society such as ours, the list of achieved statuses is almost endless.

Status is a sign of our social structure. A status shows how people are related to each other, and we know what is expected of us when we recognize each other's status.

Master Status

When one status plays a major role in shaping a person's life, it is called a master status. For children and teenagers, master status is usually defined by age. For example, you are an "11th grader" or a "16-year-old." In addition, a master status could be "football player," "good history student," or "violinist." For adults, marital status, parenthood, economic resources, and employment may provide identity-defining statuses.

What Are Roles?

Do you behave the same way around your parents as when you are with your friends? You probably alter your behavior because you know that your parents expect certain things and your friends expect others. Every status carries with it socially defined **roles**, or expected behavior patterns.

Learning and Playing Roles

We learn how to perform roles by observing and interacting with others who already understand them.
EXAMPLE: From the age of four or five, American children are taught the role behaviors associated with their status as students. They learn to raise their hands, walk down the hall, ask permission to go to the bathroom, do homework, and pay attention in class.

Every person plays many roles at any particular time in life, and roles change as statuses change.

Expectations and Performance

Think about the mothers you know. Do any two treat their children in exactly the same way? Almost certainly not. No two people who occupy the same status perform their roles identically. Instead, roles provide the script for individuals to express themselves in their own ways.

Role expectations are the behaviors expected of someone in a particular role. These expectations are determined by the society and are similar within a culture. In reality, people's *role performance* may vary widely, and may not match the behavior expected by society. Students do not always do their homework, and children do not always obey their parents. Parents, in turn, may mistreat or neglect their children.

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Reciprocal Relationships

All roles have **reciprocal roles**, or roles that are part of the interaction between related statuses.

EXAMPLES: An employee has an employer, a parent has a child, a doctor has a patient, and a coach has athletes. No one can fulfill one role without the existence of the other.

Role Strain and Role Conflict

Even if you wanted to fulfill all the role expectations society places on you, it isn't always possible. **Role strain** may occur when conflicting demands are built into a role.

EXAMPLE: Employees of the National Park Service help visitors enjoy the natural beauty of the parks. They conduct tours, explain the plants and wildlife, and encourage people to explore nature. However, with increasing numbers of tourists visiting the parks, park employees must turn people away, prohibit them from taking their cars on park roads, and supervise their activities so that the ecosystem is not destroyed. Park employees, then, can feel role strain from carrying out these conflicting aspects of their job.

Role conflict occurs when incompatible expectations arise from two or more statuses held by the same person. Fulfillment

Policing the Police

Criminologist Aogan Mulcahy studied the role conflict experienced by internal affairs officers from police departments in four cities in the southwestern United States. These officers were responsible for investigating accusations of misconduct on the part of other officers. As a result, they experienced conflict between their roles as colleagues and as police inspectors. They reported being snubbed by other officers, who would avoid riding elevators or eating with them. Some reacted by going out of their way to compliment other officers on their work, and others took pride in their belief that they were "real cops." In all cases, the internal affairs officers made special efforts to reduce the discomfort of their role conflict.
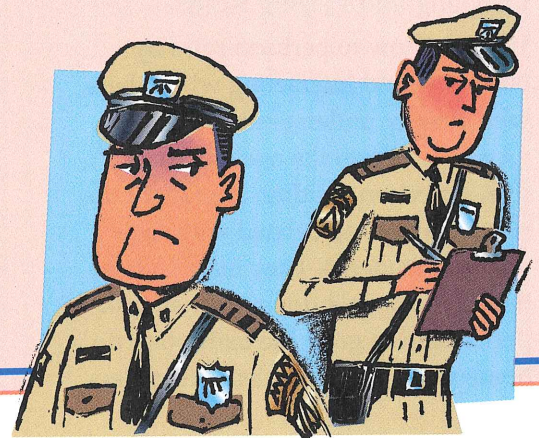
of the roles associated with one status may directly violate the roles linked to another. **EXAMPLE:** Soldiers may experience intense role conflict. Young men who have been brought up to feel that killing is wrong are expected to fire guns and activate missiles. The behaviors expected of them as good members of society are in conflict with those expected of them as military people.

Social Structures and Society

Every society has a structure or organization. In addition to the statuses people hold and the roles they play, the social structures of a society's institutions help define that society. Different types of societies have different statuses, structures, roles, and institutions for performing the functions that help people meet basic needs.

Social Functions

If they are to survive, societies must help their citizens by organizing basic functions, such as:

* *Arranging activities* so that people get the goods and services they need.
* *Protecting people* from external threats, such as attack from other countries, and internal threats, such as crime.
* *Replacing people* who die or migrate.
* *Transmitting knowledge* of statuses, roles, and norms to new members (immigrants and children).
* *Motivating people* to perform their roles by assigning meaning and purpose to social activities.

Social Institutions

All societies have **social institutions**, established patterns of beliefs and behaviors that meet basic social needs. Our social institutions are the ways we perform the social functions listed above. Social institutions vary according to the complexity of the society, but all societies have them.

* *Families* usually take responsibility for raising the young and teaching children about proper roles, statuses, and norms.
* *Education* in a complex society becomes an institution separate from the family, specializing in transmitting more advanced knowledge or helping students relate successfully to people and institutions outside the family.
* *Economic institutions* specialize in helping people obtain goods and services. In simple societies, they may be tied closely to family roles, with work activities different for men than for women.
* *Governments* run the affairs of a society, provide laws and justice, and meet a number of social needs that cannot be handled by families alone.
* *Military institutions* provide protection from groups outside the society and may also be used as a tool of a government's expansion plans.
* *Religious institutions* guide members in understanding the meaning of life.

Types of Societies

One way to identify and compare types of societies is to classify them according to how they use technology. Technology—the machines, equipment, and skills or techniques we work with—helps differentiate societies. We can organize societies from the simplest to the most complex. The simpler a society, the less division of labor or specialization of tasks. The more complex a society, the more specialized the occupations. Also, the more complex society has a greater reliance on a

Types of Societies			
	Hunting/Gathering	**Pastoral**	**Horticultural**
Relative Size	Small	Medium	Medium
Location and permanence	Small, widely dispersed groups continually move to seek and find resources.	Small groups of individuals move regularly to graze herds of animals.	Villages last at least a few years; people move frequently to fertile ground for growing crops.
Distinguishing product or achievement	Simple tools, baskets, pots, clothing, and dwellings made from plants, stones, animal skins, and bones.	Domesticated animals.	Food grown from crops; small permanent and semi-permanent villages.
Other features	Almost all group members are related; gender and kinship define authority and statuses; decisions are based on general agreement.	Kinship defines roles and status. Domesticated animals provide a steady source of food and materials for clothing and shelter. Group size increases. Priests and other leaders emerge.	Emerged 10,000 to 12,000 years ago; people stay in one area and trade with or make war on groups in other areas. Groups begin to include unrelated "strangers."

complicated technology that requires increasingly higher levels of education among its citizens to create and operate it.

Some types of societies are described in the following chart.

Agricultural	Industrial	Postindustrial
Larger	Largest	Largest
Permanent villages and cities are built, the largest in river valleys, whose flood waters provide fertile soil and whose currents provide a means of travel.	Nations are formed and in turn form alliances with other nations.	Postindustrial nations have global influence.
Cities, temples, plumbing, roads, defensive walls, writing, philosophy, history, literature.	Manufactured goods, electric power, cars, airplanes, TVs, telephones.	Production of information; service-oriented economies; nuclear power; space exploration.
Appeared about 5,000 years ago; developed governments, laws, economic systems, trade, religious institutions, armies, and written language. Populations number in the hundreds of thousands or more and include foreigners.	Began in the 1800s; standard of living rises enormously and rapidly; job specialization increases; warfare can be waged on a worldwide scale.	From the mid-1900s; services are emphasized over goods; science and education continue to improve standards of living; social groups cross national borders through increased communication technologies; warfare has the potential to destroy world civilization.

Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

In the late 19th century Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist, classified societies into two basic types. *Gemeinschaft* means "community," and the *gemeinschaft* society is typical of rural life. People with similar backgrounds and life experiences live in small communities where almost everyone knows one another. Social interactions are intimate and familiar, and people are committed to and have a sense of belonging to the larger group. *Gesellschaft* means "society" or "association." The *gesellschaft* society is characteristic of modern urban life. Most people are strangers and have little in common with other members of the community. Relationships are based on practical tasks and are impersonal, such as that between a customer and a sales clerk or among business people at a company meeting. In such societies, Tönnies suggested, individual goals are more important than group goals.

The Nature of Groups

Groups and organizations are components of the overall social structure of all societies. In a hunting and gathering society, the most significant groups are bands—combinations of families that gather together seasonally to forage for foods. In contrast, postindustrial societies have a complex web of groups and organizations that support the overall social structure. For both types of society, groups are made up of people interacting with one another and with other groups.

What Are Groups?

For sociologists a **group** is any number of people with similar norms, values, and expectations who regularly interact. People in groups have interrelated statuses and roles.

The simplest of all social groups is a dyad, or a two-member group. A married couple is a dyad. Dyads generally allow the closest relationships. However, the group is destroyed when one member leaves. A triad, or three-member group, stays intact if it loses a member.

Generally, groups must be small enough for members to interact regularly in a direct and familiar way. As the size of a group grows, the nature of the interactions changes significantly. In a larger group, each member has less time to speak and must listen to more points of view.

Group Size and Congress

The U.S. Congress is composed of two houses: the 435-member House of Representatives and the 100-member Senate. The two houses interact regularly, share common identities, and have common goals. However, their different sizes make them function very differently. The House of Representatives has many more rules, limits time for debates, and votes electronically. Senators still vote by saying "Yea" or "Nay," and they are allowed to talk as long as they like on the Senate floor. The record is held by Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, who once spoke for over 24 hours.
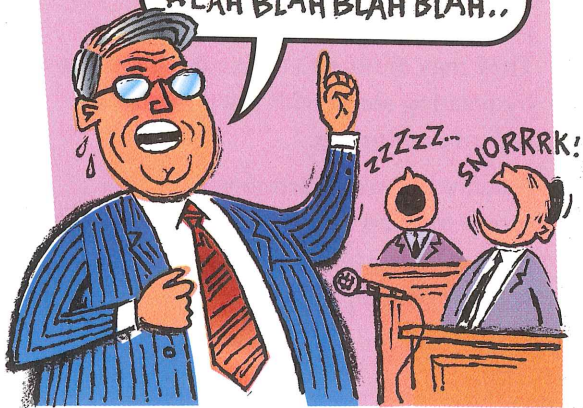
Characteristics of Groups

Groups may have different sizes, but they share **three** characteristics:

1. **Structured Interaction.** To be a group, people must form lasting, structured patterns of interactions. Group interactions are different from the interactions of **aggregates**—collections of people who just happen to be in the same place at the same time. People in an aggregate, such as patients in a doctor's waiting room, may make comments to one another, but they don't expect to gather again in the future. A group of people establishes *patterns* of interactions, so that even though they may not see one another for days or weeks, when they reassemble, they interact in familiar ways.

   EXAMPLES: Depending on the size and intimacy of the group, interaction may take many forms. In a close family, members often communicate nonverbally because they know one another so well. In an office with 30 employees, group members might interact through memos, meetings, and e-mail. In both cases, patterns of interaction are established.

2. **Common Goals and Norms.** Group members share common goals.

   EXAMPLES: A family goal may include having children who go to college. The school's French Club members may be working toward a trip to France. Professional organizations seek to establish standards for their members so that the reputation of all is protected.

Common Identities Among the Plains Indians

For hundreds of years, Native American tribes in the Central Plains of North America found various ways to forge common identities among their widely scattered members. Many formed "age sets" that included all the men born during a certain time. Each age set had distinctive dances, songs, possessions, and privileges. Members of each set pooled their wealth to buy admission to a higher level. For most Plains societies, an important step for boys was to gain warrior status as they became young men. Later, they played roles in government and eventually would become "elders" with special ritual responsibilities. Even though they lived in different villages or moved in separate bands, they were bound with a common identity at each stage of their lives.

Along with the common goals of group members are the common norms they share.

EXAMPLE: For a sports team, group norms probably include attending practice, working out, and cooperating with teammates.

No matter what goals and norms a group defines, they are commonly understood and supported by all group members. As groups grow larger, they generally develop **coalitions**, alliances of a few people within the group toward a common goal.

EXAMPLE: A city council is debating whether or not to allow a transmitting tower near a school building. Some council members may form an informal coalition to get the tower approved.

A coalition may become relatively permanent if the members share many similar goals over a period of time.

3. **Common Identity.** Members of a group share a sense of belonging that encourages a common identity.

EXAMPLE: College students who have left their families for the first time may join sororities and fraternities that provide new "sisters" and "brothers." They may announce their new identities by wearing shirts with the Greek symbols of their group.

A shared identity further separates a group from an aggregate. In an aggregate, no sense of belonging or common identity develops.

Relationships Within Groups

Groups help people meet their needs in many ways. Social relationships form within groups when the interaction among people continues long enough for a relatively stable set of social expectations to develop. These social relationships may be put into **two** categories:

1. **Instrumental Relationships** focus on accomplishing goals, and they are generally seen as means to an end.
2. **Expressive Relationships** are valued for their own sakes and have no goal beyond the pleasure each person takes in the relationship.

Most relationships that we have are both instrumental and expressive, and most groups combine elements of each.

How Do Groups Work?

There are many ways to study what groups do. Among them, sociologists have found it useful to look at how decisions are made within the group and at how leaders are chosen and how they behave.

Decision-making Processes

Groups develop decision-making processes that give them a life of their own. Generally, groups make decisions in one of **two** ways:

1. **Decisions Are Made by Nearly all Group Members Participating as Equals.** It is not usual for voting to take place. When a question comes up, the decision will be made after group discussion in which every member has a chance to speak.


Sociologist's Perspective

Sociograms

Sociologists sometimes try to understand how a group works by constructing a sociogram—a diagram that shows relationship patterns among group members. A sociogram is usually constructed by asking each member of a group to identify a "best friend" or the person with whom he or she would most like to do something, such as go to the movies or eat lunch. The results are collected and charted. Sociograms are helpful to sociologists in identifying group leaders, cliques (subgroups), and individuals who are isolated.

Alison, Kelly, and Sandy form a "clique." Michelle is not a member of Sandy's clique. Nicole is isolated. She knows Michelle and Alison but is not part of a group with either girl.

loose relationship
close relationship
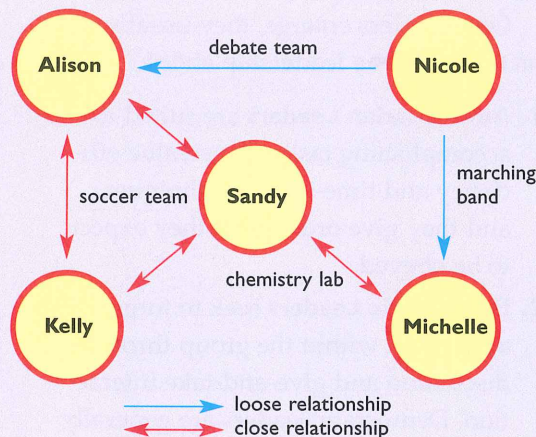
Discussion continues until most members can agree. The final decision is a group consensus.

2. **Decisions Are Made by One or Two Leaders.** Leaders may be elected or formally selected, but they often lead simply because the other members are willing to follow them. This willingness may be based on a judgment of the leader's ability or on an emotional response to some personality characteristic.

Leadership

When a group first forms, one or more central figures—or leaders—emerge fairly quickly. According to a study by R. F. Bales in 1951, a leader of a new group tends to be both the "best liked" and the one with the "best ideas." However, Bales's research showed that as a group develops, two types of leaders emerge: (1) the "best liked," or an emotional leader who helps keep the group solid and harmonious, and (2) an "idea" person who is practical and coordinates activities.

Once leaders emerge, they usually take on one of **three** leadership styles:

1. **Authoritarian Leaders** are suited to accomplishing tasks. They value efficiency and time-saving techniques, and they give orders that they expect to be obeyed.

2. **Democratic Leaders** seek to forge agreement within the group through discussion and give-and-take interaction. Democratic leaders are generally not as efficient as authoritarian leaders.

3. **Laissez-faire Leaders** adopt a "hands-off" approach and make little or no attempt to organize members or to coordinate decision making. This leadership style is usually the least effective because most groups need at least some direction and guidance.

No one leadership style is always best. In some circumstances, saving time and being efficient are very important, and in others, consulting all members of the group may take priority.
EXAMPLES: If a group is under immediate attack by an enemy, people need to act quickly, and they generally respond best to a leader who barks clear, concise orders. On the other hand, a group engaged in a neighborhood clean-up project probably will respond better to democratic leadership and decision making.

Types of Groups

Sociologists distinguish among types of groups: primary and secondary groups, in-groups and out-groups, and reference groups. The picture opposite illustrates the type of groups described below.

Primary and Secondary Groups

Groups may be categorized based on the nature of the relationships that exist within them. **Primary groups** are based on intimate, face-to-face association and cooperation. People usually identify closely with their primary groups, such as family, close friends, or business partners. The relationships last for a long time and usually have emotional depth.

Types of Groups

Secondary Group

Primary Group

In-Group

Out-Group

Reference Group
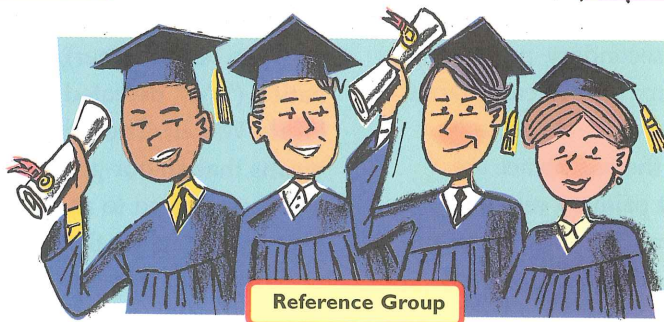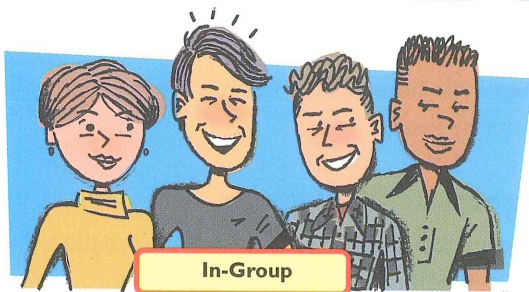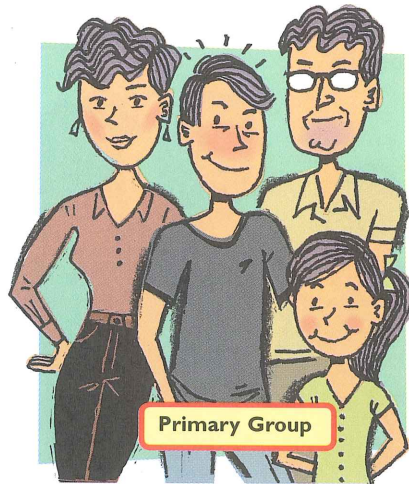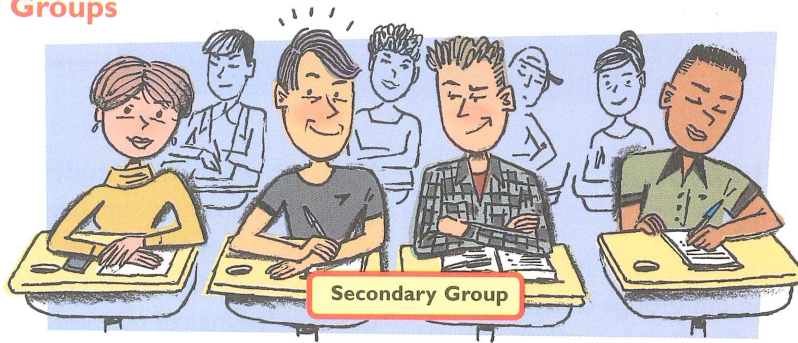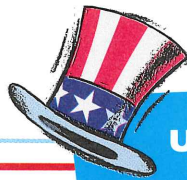
High School In-Groups and Out-Groups

The tendency to see in-groups in a more positive light than out-groups often leads people to believe that their in-groups are superior. Since one person's in-group is another person's out-group, conflict is bound to occur. The conflict may be mild and relatively harmless, such as when school grade levels compete at a pep rally to see who can show the most support for sports teams.

However, when some students identify the out-groups of others negatively, such as "jocks," "nerds," or "eggheads," the members of those groups understandably develop feelings of resentment. Sometimes such feelings can erupt in violence. It has been suggested that some school shootings—such as the one at Columbine High School in 1999—are the result of conflicts between in-groups and out-groups.

Secondary groups, on the other hand, are formal, impersonal groups in which there is little social intimacy or mutual understanding. They are usually larger than primary groups or of shorter duration. Social relationships are generally superficial.

Group relationships are usually "more or less" primary or secondary, not absolutely so. Secondary groups can change into primary groups, and vice versa. For example, groups in the workplace are often secondary, but primary relations can develop within them. If the work group is stable over time, it may evolve into a primary group.

In-groups and Out-groups

An in-group is any group to which people feel they belong. The in-group may be as narrow as one's family ("We" went on vacation last summer), or as broad as a nation ("We" defeated the Germans in World War II). The existence of an in-group means that an out-group also exists— a group referred to as " they" or "them." People tend to see the world in terms of out-groups and in-groups.

Reference Groups

Sociologists use the term **reference group** to refer to any group that individuals use as a standard for evaluating themselves. Reference groups are not always groups to which we belong. For example, high school students may model their behavior on that of a group they would like to join. The reference group's influence may be so strong that a student will begin behaving like its members.

Reference groups play major roles in shaping our opinions of ourselves. For example, a beautiful girl may consider herself to be ugly because she compares herself to much-admired movie stars. Reference groups change as people get older and life circumstances change. When young people go to college, their reference groups usually shift from people they knew in high school and their neighborhoods to people they encounter in college.

Conforming to Group Judgments

How many of us will follow our convictions in the face of opposing opinions? Solomon Asch (1951) was interested in the effects of group pressure on people's opinions and tested this question in a famous experiment. He brought groups of seven to nine male college students into a classroom and asked them to look at two white cards, one with a single line and one with three lines of different lengths. All students had to identify out loud which line on the second card was the same length as the line on the first card. The trick was that all but one of the students were in league with the researchers and had been coached to select the wrong answers. The uncoached student was always asked for his answer after almost everyone else had answered.

Even though the answers were obviously wrong, more than one third of the time the uncoached students did not trust their own eyesight and went along with the group. A tally of all of the students tested showed 37 percent agreed with the false judgments of the group. When the subjects were asked to judge the length of the lines away from the influence of the group, they made errors only 1 percent of the time.

Formal Organizations

When secondary groups become large and complex, sociologists call them **formal organizations.** These groups are deliberately created to achieve specific goals, and their members work together to support their objectives.

Voluntary Associations and Bureaucracies

Organizations take many shapes and forms. Some are **voluntary associations,** such as sports teams, hobby clubs, and charitable organizations. Some voluntary associations are informal, in that they rely on voluntary participation and contributions and may have few or no written rules.

Nearly all of the formal organizations sociologists study, however, are **bureaucracies**—large, hierarchical organizations. The members of a bureaucracy work for hire. Virtually all large companies are bureaucracies, as are most modern governments.

Weber's Model

Max Weber was one of the first sociologists to think about the concept of bureaucracy. He wrote in Germany during the early 20th century, when capitalism was spawning more and more large businesses. Weber saw bureaucracy as a sensible way for complex businesses and governments to organize. Bureaucracies, Weber said, are set up to achieve specific goals. A bureaucracy's members have assigned tasks (a division of labor) that are narrowly defined. For example, one office worker may handle only letters of complaint, another only letters requesting information.

According to Weber, bureaucracies have the following characteristics:

* *A hierarchical chain of command;* the top bureaucrat has ultimate control, and authority flows from the top down.
* *A clear division of labor* in which every individual has a specialized job.

Did You Know?

Red Tape

The term *bureaucracy* often brings to mind long rows of identical desks staffed by people working with identical equipment, endless forms and procedures, and a special, complex vocabulary. The term *red tape* describes some of the hassles that people experience in dealing with large organizations: standing in long lines to get paperwork done, being transferred from one office to another when trying to get information, having to fill out long forms. This term comes from the ribbon that English civil servants once used to tie up and bind legal documents.

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* *Clearly written, well-established, formal rules* that all people in the organization follow.
* *A clearly defined set of goals* that all people in the organization strive toward.
* *Merit-based hiring and promotion;* no granting of jobs to friends or family unless they are the best qualified.
* *Job performance that is judged by productivity,* or how much work the individual gets done.

Weber's characterization was intended to sharply distinguish the bureaucracy from more informal types of social organizations, such as primary groups. Weber's features of bureaucracies make up an ideal type that serves as a model to measure characteristics of actual organizations. The more an organization conforms to the model, the more it can be regarded as a bureaucracy.
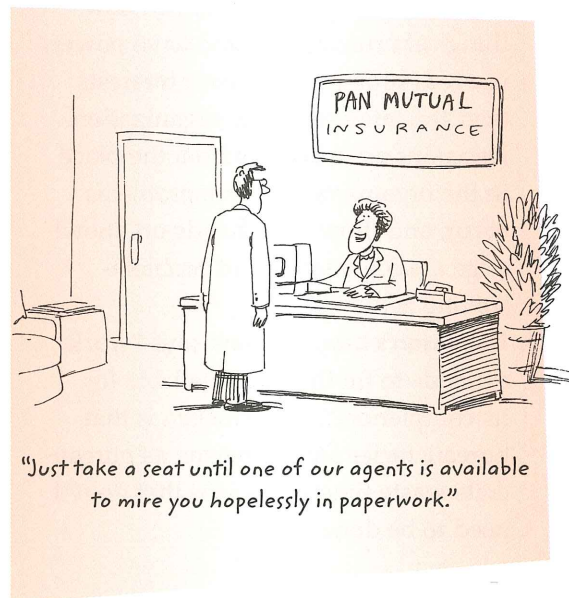
The Value of Bureaucracies

Max Weber saw value in the ability of bureaucracies to reach their goals with speed and efficiency. Other sociologists have suggested that bureaucracies are the best way to organize large numbers of people to achieve broad, large-scale goals, such as the mass production of goods at reasonable prices. Bureaucracies provide order by clearly defining job responsibilities and rewards. Bureaucracies also provide social stability, because the organization goes on when individuals leave.

The Problems of Bureaucracies

In spite of their values, bureaucracies are widely criticized. Many critics say that bureaucrats, the people who work in bureaucracies, tend to lose sight of the organization's purpose. They develop rituals that follow written rules and regulations, and thus creativity in the organization is squelched. Critics decry the "red tape" that results because each worker has such a limited knowledge of the overall workings of the bureaucracy, he or she can't really help the customer (or citizen) who is trying to get a response to even the simplest request.

Sociologists have developed several principles or rules to describe the operation of bureaucracies and the interactions

"Just take a seat until one of our agents is available to mire you hopelessly in paperwork."

of people within them. **Three** of these rules or principles are very critical of bureaucracies.

1. **The Peter Principle.** Laurence Peter states that "in a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence." Peter argues that people who do good work at one bureaucratic level are likely to be promoted to the next level. They continue to be promoted until they do not do good work. This process leaves people working beyond their level of competence.

2. **The Iron Law of Oligarchy.** This rule, developed by sociologist Robert Michels, describes the tendency of bureaucracies to result in oligarchies, or concentration of power in a few people at the top of a hierarchy. Orders flow from the top down, so most people in the hierarchy have no say in how things are run. Those who have power use it to promote their own interests over the interests of the organization. Decisions are made far from the place in the organization where problems occur, and those with hands-on knowledge are often left out of problem-solving activities.

3. **Parkinson's Law.** This law says "work expands to fill the time available for its completion." The criticism is that bureaucracies are inefficient, as bureaucrats waste time doing jobs that do not need to be done.

As a result of these criticisms, large business, government, and not-for-profit organizations have hired sociologists to work with them to overcome some of these problems. Sociologists and other business consultants encourage business leaders to "empower" their employees to solve problems where they occur, to break down hierarchical structures in favor of more democratic ones, and to include employees in writing mission statements for their organizations and in setting their own objectives for their work.

Interaction

We have examined the overall social structures of societies and their component parts—groups and organizations. The smallest and most intimate level of social structures is that of **social interaction**, the way in which people respond to one another. Whenever people take one another into account in what they do, they are engaged in some kind of social interaction.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a kind of interactionist perspective. It stresses the meaning that social interactions have for individuals and groups and how those interactions help them interpret the world. Symbolic interactionists emphasize the influence that particular situations have on social behavior. They argue that when two people meet, they constantly evaluate each other's behavior and react accordingly.

Social interaction is a very delicate and complex process.

George Herbert Mead, an early-20th-century U.S. sociologist, is widely regarded as the founder of the interactionist perspective. Mead was interested in observing the most minute forms of communication—head nodding, smiles, frowns—and in understanding how such individual behavior was influenced by the larger context of a group or society. Although Mead never published a book, his students at the University of Chicago edited volumes of his lectures and published them after his death.

Two Approaches to Social Interaction

Once Mead's teachings became known, other sociologists began to focus carefully on social interaction that occurs in small groups. Sociologists Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel provide us with two distinctive methods of studying social interaction.

1. **Goffman's Dramaturgy.** Goffman theorized that many of our daily activities might be explained as self-conscious efforts to control the impression we make on others. His method is known


U.S. Culture Connection

Kissing as Dramaturgy

At the beginning of a romance, impressions are very important. Dramaturgy often governs social interactions at this stage. In the novel *The Bell Jar,* author Sylvia Plath describes a shy, studious girl's nonchalant reaction to her first kiss.

"While he kissed me, I kept my eyes open and tried to memorize the spacing of the house lights so I would never forget them.
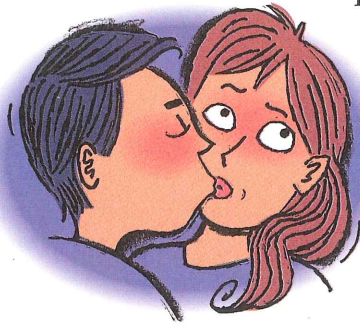
"Finally, Buddy stepped back. 'I guess you go out with a lot of boys,' Buddy said.

"Well, I guess I do. . .

"'Well, I have to study a lot.'

"So do I, I put in hastily. I have to keep my scholarship after all. Still, I think I could manage to see you every third weekend.

"I was almost fainting and dying to get back to college and tell everybody."

as dramaturgy, which compares every-day life to the setting of the theater and stage. Just as actors project certain images, all of us seek to present particular features of our personalities while we hide other qualities. So, in class you may project a serious image; at a party, you might try to look relaxed and friendly.

2. **Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology.** Ethnomethodology is a social interaction theory that focuses on the rules underlying ordinary activities. For ethnomethodologists, the central task of sociology is to study the process by which members of a society construct meaning and rules. In the 1960s, Garfinkel devised a technique for uncovering rules. His method is based on the premise that by *breaking* rules and interpreting reactions, we can better understand the rules' importance.

EXAMPLE: In one experiment, Garfinkel asked students to pretend to be guests when they went home to their families—addressing a father as "Mr. Smith"

Forms of Social Interaction

	Exchange	Competition
Description and kinds of rules	Interactions are based on reciprocity, give and take, shared values and trust; rules are informal.	Groups or individuals oppose each other to reach a goal that only one can achieve; rules agreed to in advance govern the interaction.
Examples	Greetings, taking turns in conversation, making and keeping dates.	Sports events, college admissions, winning customers.
Pros	Through repetition of rewarding exchanges, relationships are built and maintained.	Groups are motivated to accomplish their goals, and group unity is achieved.
Cons	Uneven exchange may cause one party to quit.	Can produce stress; lack of cooperation or inequality among group members can keep group from winning.

or not speaking until spoken to. Of 49 families, 46 were upset with the student and tried to restore family relations. This reaction suggested that the role of "child" in the family was very important. In other experiments students broke other norms, for instance, asking "What do you mean?" to a simple statement like, "I had a flat tire." Each violation of the rules of interaction produced confusion and often anxiety and anger.

Forms of Social Interaction

Like statuses, roles, groups, and institutions, regular patterns of interaction are a part of a social structure. The most common forms of social interaction are:

* Exchange.
* Competition.
* Conflict.
* Cooperation.
* Accommodation.

These are described in the chart below.

	Conflict	Cooperation	Accommodation
	Groups attempt to control each other by force; rules don't exist, are minimal, or are ignored.	Groups join forces to reach a common goal; rules can be built into a process.	Cooperation and conflict are balanced; rules include negotiation and compromise and may include mediation and arbitration.
	Fights between gangs, wars, legal disputes, some arguments.	Workers building a house, city dwellers pulling together after a disaster.	Workers' strikes and labor negotiations, truces between nations, compromises.
	Solidarity and cooperation within the group are strengthened; hidden problems may be highlighted, leading to social change.	Jobs get done, rewards are shared.	A difficult goal is achieved and conflict ends, at least temporarily.
	Chaos, suffering, destruction of lives and property result.	Lack of individual achievement may bother some.	Difficult to achieve; if resolution is not balanced, conflict may break out again.

Networking and Technology

Advances in technology are creating new types of social networking. We don't need face-to-face contact for knowledge sharing anymore. Whether we are looking for jobs or for companionship, we can network through our computers. Electronic job boards, e-mail, and chat groups are all examples of new ways to network. The Internet and other technological changes have profound implications for social networking. No longer are people bound by geography and social circumstance to find their contacts.
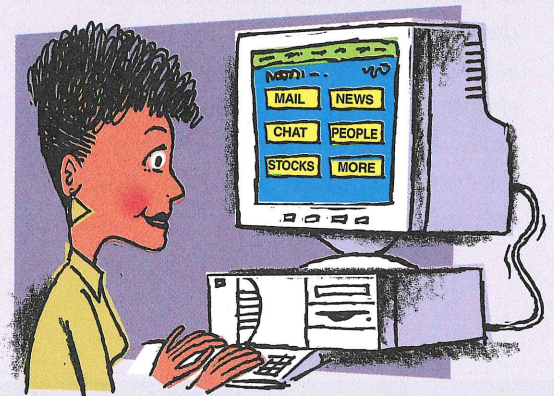
Social Networks

All people in a society are linked to many groups through a variety of social interactions. We all know people in different social circles, and these people broaden our contacts outside our immediate primary and secondary groups. This connection is known as a **social network**, a series of social relationships that link a person directly to others and, as a result, indirectly to still more people. Social networks may limit interactions by including some and excluding others, but they also may broaden an individual's contacts with other people and resources.

You may have heard of "networking" in connection with finding employment. **EXAMPLE:** You might look for a summer job by asking your best friend's father if his firm is hiring summer employees.

Networking is a good thing for the person who gets a job. It is also good for the company looking to attract bright, talented young people to its ranks. But people without good connections may feel the system is unfair.

The structure of a society can be understood as relationships among people and groups. Every person has several statuses, plays multiple roles, and is a member of various groups.

Social institutions organize the functions of a society to meet the needs of its citizens. Different types of societies can be described by how their members carry out basic functions.

Groups afford their members structured interactions, common goals and norms, and shared identity. Different groups have different methods of making decisions and function best with different kinds of leadership. Each person is a member of primary and secondary groups, in-groups and out-groups, and reference groups. Some groups are formal organizations, and some of these are bureaucracies.

Interaction among individuals is generally studied by sociologists using the interactionist perspective. Interaction among groups can take the form of exchange, competition, conflict, cooperation, or accommodation. Social networks encourage interaction among people connected to each other through various groups.

Sociology

WORDS TO KNOW
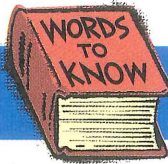
achieved status—position that comes through the traits, talents, actions, efforts, activities, and accomplishments of an individual. *p. 44*

aggregate—collection of people who just happen to be in the same place at the same time and do not have a lasting pattern of interaction. *p. 51*

ascribed status—position assigned to a person by society for reasons unrelated to the individual's unique talents or abilities. *p. 44*

bureaucracy—large, hierarchical organization of employees in which each member has an assigned task. *p. 58*

coalition—alliance of a few members within a group to achieve a common goal. *p. 52*

formal organization—impersonal, large group deliberately created to achieve specific goals. *p. 58*

group—two or more people with similar norms, values, and expectations who regularly interact. *p. 50*

primary group—group based on intimate, face-to-face association and cooperation. *p. 54*

reciprocal roles—corresponding roles, such as husband/wife or doctor/patient, that define the patterns of interaction between related statuses. *p. 46*

reference group—group that individuals use as a standard for evaluating themselves. *p. 57*

role conflict—friction caused when two or more statuses held by the same person have incompatible expectations. *p. 46*

role strain—friction caused when conflicting demands are built into a role. *p. 46*

roles—expected behavior patterns that people exhibit in relation to a group or to society. *p. 45*

secondary group—formal, impersonal, often temporary group in which there is little social intimacy. *p. 56*

social institution—established pattern of beliefs and behaviors that meets basic social needs. *p. 47*

social interaction—way in which people respond to one another. *p. 60*

social network—series of social relationships that link a person directly to others and, as a result, indirectly to still more people. *p. 64*

social structure—way in which a society is organized into predictable relationships. *p. 44*

status—position or social standing of an individual within a group or society. *p. 44*

voluntary association—relatively informal organization based on voluntary membership. *p. 58*